Asari Endou

Illustration by
Marui-no

12

Magical Girl Raising Project

episodes Δ

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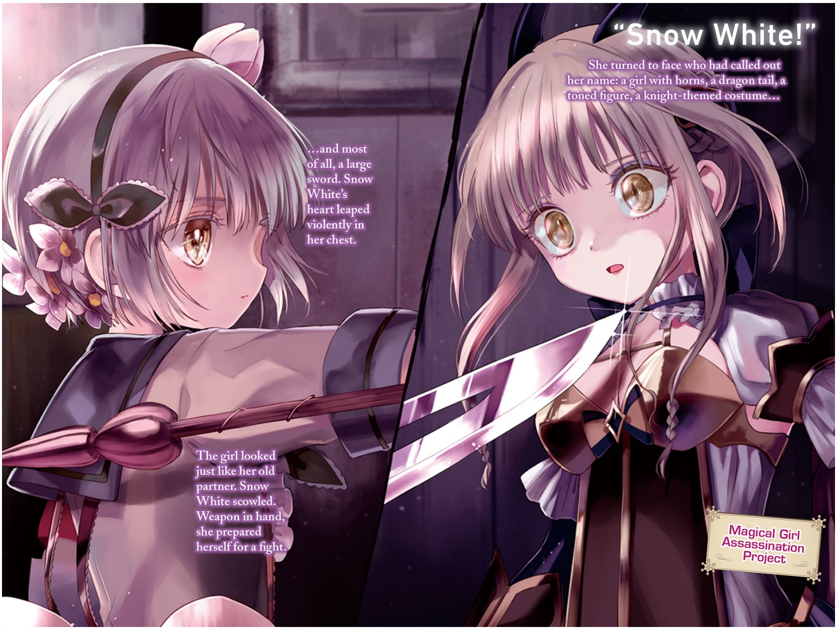

“Snow White!”

She turned to face who had called out her name: a girl with horns, a dragon tail, a toned figure, a knight-themed costume…

…and most of all, a large sword. Snow White’s heart leaped violently in her chest.

The girl looked just like her old partner. Snow White scowled. Weapon in hand, she prepared herself for a fight.

Magical Girl Assassination Project

A Witch, a Boxed Lunch, and an Expression of Love

Magical Girl Raising Project

episodes Δ

12

Asari Endou

Illustration by Marui-no

Yen On
New York

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Magical Girl Raising Project, Vol. 12
Asari Endou

Translation by Jennifer Ward
Cover art by Marui-no

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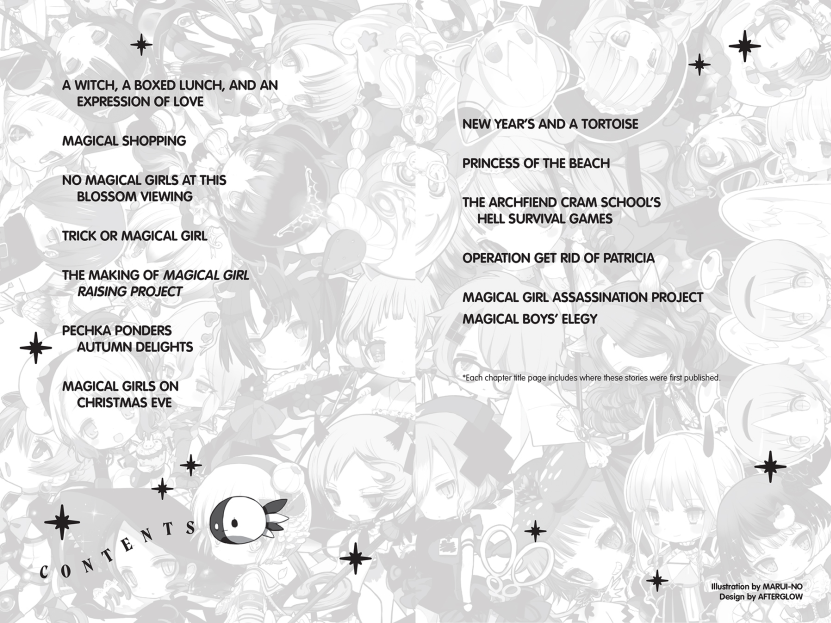

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MAGICAL BOYS' ELEGY

*Each chapter title page includes where these stories were first published.

Illustration by MARUI-NO
Design by AFTERGLOW

Magical Girl Raising Project Story Arcs

✝ Magical Girl Raising Project 1

The super-popular mobile game *Magical Girl Raising Project* can cause miracles: It turns one out of every few tens of thousands of players into a real magical girl. Having been bestowed with magical powers, these girls get to live each day to the fullest.
But then one day, management sends them its unilateral decree: "We have too many magical girls, so we're cutting the number in half." And thus begins a harsh and ruthless race for survival among sixteen magical girls…

✝ Magical Girl Raising Project restart 2

Having been bestowed with powers by the Magical Kingdom, these magical girls work hard every day at helping people. But then the girls receive invitations from an unknown sender to a game called *Magical Girl Raising Project*. Trapped in an unfair game where they could die at any time, each of the sixteen magical girls comes up with a plan to survive, as the figure behind the curtain toys with them…

✝ Magical Girl Raising Project limited 3

During what was supposed to be a typical after-school club meeting, a small fairy named Toko appears out of nowhere with incredible news: All seven attendees have what it takes to become full-fledged magical girls! In exchange for their newfound abilities, they promise to save Toko from the evil mages who are hunting her down—but these baddies have some special magical-girl powers of their own!

✝ Magical Girl Raising Project JOKERS 4

Sakura Kagami is just an ordinary girl, and her magical-girl persona, Prism Cherry, is just as ordinary, too. After the same old tired routine of saving people with her boring magic in a peaceful town, Sakura learns something incredible: Her classmate Nami Aoki is a magical girl, too!
It doesn't take long before Sakura and Nami's fate takes a turn and the veneer of magical-girl-hood falls apart to reveal something incredibly sinister…

✝ Magical Girl Raising Project ACES 5

Snow White, a.k.a. the Magical-Girl Hunter, is searching for her dear friend Ripple when she's summoned by one of the Three Sages, the Magical Kingdom's highest authority. The Sage asks Snow White to locate a certain magical girl, but it turns out this mission has much more at stake than just a missing person…

✝ Magical Girl Raising Project QUEENS 6

Puk Puck's plan to "save" the Magical Kingdom is moving steadily along. Right when the situation seems hopeless, Pfle makes a desperate move in order to put a stop to her incredibly risky plan and saves Shadow Gale from her clutches. Magical girls from all walks of life join forces in an attempt to put a stop to Puk Puck's ceremony, but a certain someone stands in their way…

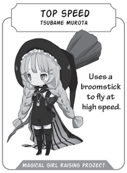
✝ Magical Girl Raising Project F2P original comic

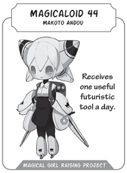
Magical girls Spinon and Alma work for the Magical Kingdom's R&D and Magical Girl Resources Departments. When they hear rumors of a magical girl with the incredibly rare ability to "cancel out death," they head to F City to investigate and take her into custody. But once they arrive at their destination, they witness something they've never imagined: a giant magical barrier covering the whole city…

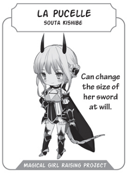
✝ Magical Girl Raising Project breakdown web serial

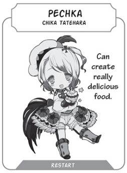
(http://konomanga.jp/manga/breakdown)

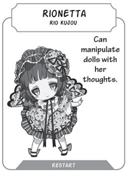
An experiment gone wrong leads to the death of a famous mage, and the passing of this illustrious individual sends the Magical Kingdom into mourning. Then, a few months later, the deceased mage's relations receive letters from his proxy regarding the inheritance of his estate, inviting them to a tiny uninhabited island the mage had used as a getaway cottage / research lab. When Mana gets one of these letters, she's skeptical, but after careful consideration, she contacts two magical-girl friends to accompany her there…

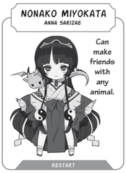

TOP SPEED
TSUBAME MUROTA
Uses a broomstick to fly at high speed.
MAGICAL GIRL RAISING PROJECT

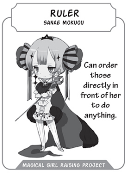

MAGICALOID 44
MAKOTO ANDOU
Receives one useful futuristic tool a day.
MAGICAL GIRL RAISING PROJECT

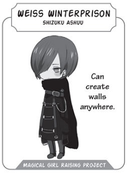

LA PUCELLE
SOUTA KISHIBE
Can change the size of her sword at will.
MAGICAL GIRL RAISING PROJECT

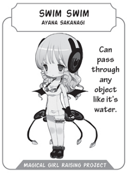

PECHKA
CHIKA TATEHARA
Can create really delicious food.
RESTART

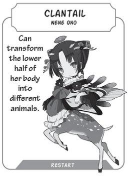

RIONETTA
RIO KUJOU
Can manipulate dolls with her thoughts.
RESTART

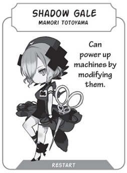

NONAKO MIYOKATA
ANNA SARIZAE
Can make friends with any animal.
RESTART

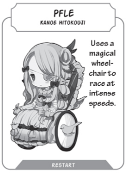

RULER
SANAE MOKUOU
Can order those directly in front of her to do anything.
MAGICAL GIRL RAISING PROJECT

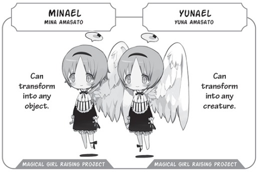

WEISS WINTERPRISON
SHIZUKU ASHUU
Can create walls anywhere.
MAGICAL GIRL RAISING PROJECT

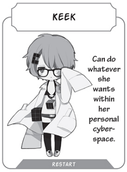

SWIM SWIM
AYANA SAKANAGI
Can pass through any object like it's water.
MAGICAL GIRL RAISING PROJECT

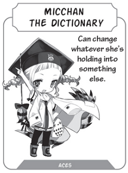

CLANTAIL
NENE ONO
Can transform the lower half of her body into different animals.
RESTART

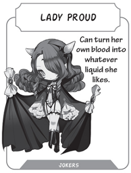

SHADOW GALE
MAMORI TOTOYAMA
Can power up machines by modifying them.
RESTART

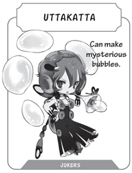

PFLE
KANOE HITOKOUJI
Uses a magical wheelchair to race at intense speeds.
RESTART


MINAEL
MINA AMASATO
YUNAEL
YUNA AMASATO
Can transform into any object.
Can transform into any creature.
MAGICAL GIRL RAISING PROJECT
MAGICAL GIRL RAISING PROJECT


KEEK
Can do whatever she wants within her personal cyberspace.
RESTART


MICCHAN THE DICTIONARY
Can change whatever she's holding into something else.
ACES


LADY PROUD
Can turn her own blood into whatever liquid she likes.
JOKERS


UTTAKATTA
Can make mysterious bubbles.
JOKERS

※ Character info includes magical-girl names, real names (where applicable), individual magic powers, and first appearance.

CHARACTERS

GLASSIANNE

Can see all sorts of places with her magical glasses.

ACES

TEPSEKEMEI

MEI

Can become one with the wind to go anywhere.

LIMITED

7753

KOTORI NANAYA

Uses magic goggles that tell her all about her targets.

LIMITED

MANA

Uses spells and ceremonies to perform various magics.

LIMITED

PRINCESS DELUGE

NAMI AOKI

Fights enemies using the power of water.

JOKERS

PRINCESS INFERNO

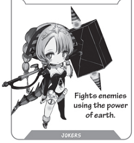
AKARI HIYAMA

Fights enemies using the power of fire.

JOKERS

PRINCESS QUAKE

CHIKO SATOU


Fights enemies using the power of earth.

JOKERS

PRINCESS TEMPEST

MEI HIGASHIONNA

Fights enemies using the power of wind.

JOKERS

ARCHFIEND PAM

Uses her four large black wings to fight.

LIMITED

※Character info includes magical-girl names, real names (where applicable), individual magic powers, and first appearance.

MARIKA FUKUROI

MARIKO FUKUROI

Can make various magic flowers bloom from her head.

JOKERS

THE MUSICIAN OF THE FOREST, CRANBERRY

Can freely manipulate sound.

MAGICAL GIRL RAISING PROJECT

HANA GEKOKUJOU

Can make senses incredibly sharp.

LIMITED

STYLER MIMI

Can use magic outfits to alter a person's appearance.

JOKERS

UMBRAIN

MITSU KASAYAMA

Uses a magic umbrella that can block anything.

JOKERS

PATRICIA

Can render any enemy powerless with her magic handcuffs.

ACES

SNOW WHITE

KOYUKI HIMEKAWA

Can hear the thoughts of those in need.

MAGICAL GIRL RAISING PROJECT

FAN LIT FAN

Uses a magic fan.

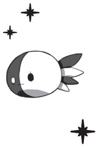
F2P

STELLA LULU

KAORU OSANAI

Can instantly master any tool.

F2P



CHARACTERS

A Witch, a Boxed Lunch, and an Expression of Love

This story takes place right in the middle of *Magical Girl Raising Project*.

Debut

Bonus with purchase of the special edition
of *Magical Girl Raising Project* at Gamers

A Witch, a Boxed Lunch, and an Expression of Love

Tsubame Murota, age nineteen, had a domestic fantasy:

The husband forgets his lunch, and when the wife realizes, she rushes after him.

"Oh, thanks. I almost had to go without lunch," the husband would say.

"Geez," the wife would reply. *"Keep your scatterbrained tendencies here at home, at least."*

After that little exchange, they'd trade a quick kiss and say good-bye. You'd see these scenes from time to time in fiction, but Tsubame didn't know whether any couples actually had them in real life. Nonetheless, the fantastical nature of the scenario was immensely enticing; she wanted to give that kind of exchange a try herself someday if she ever had the opportunity.

She knew it was out of character. But being a magical girl was out of character for Tsubame to begin with, so a little domestic fantasy wasn't that big a deal—probably. Not like she could help it; Tsubame loved sweets and magical girls, though she was too embarrassed to admit that to anyone.

And then an opportunity came. With an election coming up, her husband, a government official, was furiously busy with office work and miscellaneous tasks. His mornings were frenzied, and he frequently arrived at the office as early as five in the morning—quite the opposite of what you might expect from a bureaucrat—then he was worked to the bone, eventually returning home in the evening. Perhaps being so busy was what made Tsubame's husband, who was normally so annoyingly conscientious, forget the lunch she had packed for him on the table before going to work.

Tsubame didn't notice he'd forgotten it until five minutes after his departure. She'd put her heart and soul into this delicious lunch—even made the meatballs from scratch—and felt momentarily indignant to have it ignored, before reconsidering: *Maybe this is a chance to make my dreams a reality?*

Her husband, Shouichi, rode his bicycle to work. He'd saved up his wages from a part-time job as a student to buy a road bike that was pretty fast after all the tweaks he'd made to it. He knew the route to the office well enough to arrive at work within fifteen minutes.

If Tsubame had been a normal housewife, she would've had trouble catching up to him, even by car. But Tsubame was not a normal housewife. She was a magical girl—and a bewitching one at that.

Tsubame transformed into Top Speed, and with the boxed lunch in her right hand and her magical broomstick Rapid Swallow in her left, she leaped through the apartment window. Rapid Swallow was faster than a jet fighter, never mind a car.

Plus, Top Speed knew the area like the back of her hand. She hadn't raced through these streets for nothing. She could predict Shouichi's bike route, too.

She rose high in the air, then flew off. Not many people would see her out and about at this time of day.

Her enhanced magical-girl vision found Shouichi riding his bicycle down below, so she circled ahead of him and landed her broom. Then, after heading into an alleyway to avoid being seen, she detransformed back into Tsubame Murota and checked how far away he was—just far enough. She didn't want to pop up too close and cause him to topple off his bicycle in shock.

So she stepped out at just the right moment with the lunch box in hand and called, "Heeey! You forgot your lunch!" as naturally as possible, as if it were perfectly normal that she'd gotten ahead of him.

"…How'd you catch up with me?" Shouichi asked her.

"Oh, I managed somehow. Have a nice day at work!" After handing over the lunch, she sucked in a breath, leaned in close, then gave him a quick peck on the lips before darting back into the alley. She knew her face was red. She was shy with this stuff to begin with, but she still didn't want him seeing her blushing. Even as she did all this, she knew this sort of thing wasn't her style.

Imagining her husband's look of confusion, Top Speed couldn't help but grin.

Despite the embarrassment, she was basically satisfied. *Maybe* *next time, I'll try kissing him out the door without the lunch box*, Top Speed thought as she flew back home.

◇◇◇

Watching the witch jet away through the sky on a broomstick, Shouichi set back off on his route to work and put his feet on the pedals. *But still*, he wondered…

How can Tsubame think she's not giving herself away?

He'd seen Tsubame turn into a witch and go out on a broomstick many times before. She had to be one of the magical girls everyone in town had been talking about lately. Her transformation had come as a shock when he'd first seen it about a month ago, but as a student, he'd watched a foreign TV show involving the exact same situation, so maybe that was why he'd gotten used to it so quickly.

It seemed like Tsubame was trying to keep her magical-girl identity a secret, so he wasn't going to say anything. Shouichi wasn't that mean. He did sometimes get the urge to tease her, since she reacted so cutely when he gave her a hard time, but he was rational enough to restrain himself.

Tsubame had always been a bit spacey. Shouichi didn't know exactly what she was up to, but she seemed like she was enjoying herself, so it was all good. Besides, Shouichi was enjoying himself quite a lot, too.

The sensation of the kiss still lingered on his lips. This kind of send-off, so uncharacteristic of Tsubame, wasn't bad at all. Shouichi started pedaling again.

Magical Shopping

This story takes place shortly before the *Magical Girl Raising Project* game begins.

Debut

Preorder bonus with *An Assortment of Items Made by Magicaloid 44's Futuristic Gadget* Boss Battle Magical Item Creation Kit! also known as *Magical Girl Raising Project C88: The Super Magical Girl Set for Aspiring Heroes!* (Tsukuru no Mori)

Magical Shopping

☆ The Story So Far

Makoto Andou had become the magical girl Magicaloid 44 after helping level up a friend's character in the cell phone game *Magical Girl Raising Project*. Currently having a marvelous time couch-surfing and in need of cash to fund her vagabond lifestyle, she was scheming to make money using her magical-girl powers.

Sister Nana, a magical girl who had been trying to rope her lover into the magical-girl business, had proved an easy target. Magicaloid had been selling her one futuristic gadget per day, but then all of a sudden, Nana's lover had actually become a magical girl herself.

Losing her golden goose had Magicaloid grief-stricken. But she couldn't make a living if all she did was mourn.

You can do it! Never give up! Robotic magical girl of the future: Magicaloid 44!

◇◇◇

"This is the item that I have brought to you today."

"This? It looks like a regular tote bag, though."

Apparently, the following Thursday would be Snow White's birthday. Her partner, La Pucelle, wanted to show her appreciation with a present, so she had asked Magicaloid if she had any good stuff for sale. This was a great opportunity for Magicaloid, too—she very much wanted to sell some "good stuff." Thus, she'd put together some items to rush over to the steel tower in Kubegahama, but La Pucelle's reaction was not promising. She was clearly suspicious of Magicaloid's wares.

After all, these wares did not appear magical in nature. So

Magicaloid just had to make sure to compensate for that with her presentation. She'd cooked up the "selling magical items as presents" method when dealing with Sister Nana, and she was going to make that business model a success this time, too.

The twilight sky was turning from red to black as La Pucelle sat down on a steel girder. Magicaloid hovered in the air with her booster rockets and began her rooftop sales pitch.

"Do not be fooled by the item's appearance," said Magicaloid. "Have you not heard from Sister Nana? It was thanks to my futuristic gadgets that Winterprison was able to become a magical girl."

"Yeah, but I also heard the gadgets break in a day," La Pucelle replied.

"These items are different. They were manufactured via the futuristic gadget Boss Battle Magical Item Creation Kit."

"How's that different from the usual?"

"It is true that my items become nonfunctional after a single day. I will acknowledge that. However, the results generated by said items are lasting. Take the pen that enables you to draw like a top-tier professional manga artist. The pen will stop functioning after one day, while the art drawn with said pen remains. In other words, the magical items that have been created by the Boss Battle Magical Item Creation Kit will also continue to function. Well? Amazing, yes?"

"I don't really get it, but I guess that means they won't break."

"I can offer all of these items to you at a mere fifty thousand yen."

"Geez, fifty thousand yen..." La Pucelle had seemed somewhat interested before, but Magicaloid could sense she was quickly losing her. Magicaloid clicked her tongue to herself, just like Ripple. From their discussions in the chat, Magicaloid knew La Pucelle was a student. That much she could glean based on the magical-girl anime La Pucelle watched. Her asking price was too high for a kid.

"Then I will offer an exclusive additional fifty percent off! A shocking Magicaloid price! The cost is now twenty-five thousand yen. This is a one-time-only chance."

"Even twenty-five thousand is expensive."

"The single-day items Sister Nana purchased were ten thousand yen, you know. And *these* items can be used indefinitely. Do you not agree that twenty-five thousand is a steal?"

"You're being weirdly pushy."

Magicaloid tapped herself on the forehead a couple of times. She was aware she was being impatient. And she did have the feeling that if she was going to make a deal with La Pucelle, maybe she should conceal her motives with some small talk. But she didn't have the time for that.

Magicaloid kept talking as if she hadn't heard what La Pucelle had said. "Oh, no. Even twenty-five thousand yen is an amazing value for these products."

"How so?"

"In this tote bag, there are a total of—drumroll, please—*five whole magical items*! With this Super Magical Girl Set for Aspiring Heroes, you too can become the heroine. Snow White will also love this—that much I am sure of."

Terms like *special, bonus, limited time offer*, and *exclusive* encouraged people to loosen their purse strings. Magicaloid had to make a sale right now. She would use whatever she could, be it smarmy talk or overselling the product.

"Let me introduce these items to you. These are special—if you let this chance pass you by, there will never be another opportunity. I ask that you save your cost-related judgments until I have finished explaining everything."

Magicaloid pulled one of the items from the tote bag: a cork coaster with an illustration of several cute fairies on it. "This is the Castaway Coaster. It is fully water-resistant."

"Well, yeah, most coasters are."

"It repels not only water, but all marine things: fish, shellfish, squid, octopi, dolphins, whales, orcas, even people in swimsuits. This coaster's water resistance is unparalleled."

No reaction. Magicaloid felt like she could hear the frowning La Pucelle grumble, "Hmm."

Sensing the response was not favorable, Magicaloid pulled out the next item. "We also have these Hair Defender Stickers."

She presented a number of sticker sheets. The characters on them looked like magical girls, but they weren't current.

"I dunno those characters…," said La Pucelle, "but I'm a little curious. They're not from a TV show, and I don't think they're from a manga, either. Maybe they're video game or light novel characters?"

"Well, you see, it does not matter *what* characters they are.

What is key is the magical effects. Believe it or not, simply adhering these stickers on your person will prevent your hair from being stolen. These mysterious stickers will cause any hair-stealing deviant to be captivated by the sticker's cuteness. They will happily steal the sticker instead of your hair."

"These *are* items for fighting bosses, right? …And, um, a deviant…?"

"Yes, yes, of course. Not to worry, I have more items. Next is this."

Magicaloid then produced a simple notebook. "This is a Desu Note."

"Wait, you mean—?!"

"The person whose name is written in this notebook…"

"D-dies?!"

"Of course not. They will lose any unique speech quirks."

"The heck?"

"You can use it on someone whose accent is difficult to understand. When their speech quirks vanish, they lose their boss-like dignity and majesty, making them far more ordinary."

"Does that do anything other than piss them off?"

"Who knows? Regardless, their speech will become flawlessly polite and therefore easily understood by anyone. Hence why this item is called a Desu Note."

"I wonder if you'd talk normally if I wrote your name in it."

"…In any case, on to the next item. Behold." Next was another sticker—a single large rectangular sticker depicting two magical girls.

"This is an Anti–Mind Attack Sticker," Magicaloid explained. "They are a type of decal you stick onto your credit cards for customization purposes. Oh, but this is a *magical* sticker, of course, so it is enchanted with a special, wonderful spell."

"It makes it so your hair can't get stolen, right?" La Pucelle replied.

"Those were the other stickers. This one is different. Place this sticker on any kind of smart card and—believe it or not!—you will no longer be influenced by the emotions of others."

"…Umm, I don't really get it."

"Have you ever heard of the term 'credit card bankruptcy'? That is the sort of tragedy that occurs due to spending beyond your means. If you could avoid getting influenced by other people's desires, you could reduce wasteful expenditures. With this card up your sleeve, you will not have your credit card bills stacked against you. Ha-ha-ha."

"Was that supposed to be a joke about cards—?"

"And now for the next one. Please take a look at this plastic folder." This item, like the anti–hair theft stickers, had a bunch of magical girls on it; one could stick papers inside the folder.

"Once you write something down—well, it could be anything, but for instance, something important—and insert it in this Memory Preservation Folder, you will no longer misremember that information."

"You mean like your address or phone number?"

"More like whether you just spoke in Japanese or French."

"How could you forget that?"

"There are some incredibly forgetful people in the world, you know. Some will mistake their enemy for the person they most look up to… Surely you cannot claim this does not happen."

"I don't think it does."

"Fair enough. Indeed, you are correct. Even I understand that much, yes. Although there are the occasional off chances or slight possibilities. On to the next item, the very first one I showed you." The simple cotton bag gave off an impression of modest cleanliness. "The noble presentation of this Cotton Bag for the Aristocrat of the Meadow will make the wearer similarly noble. Simply put, just by carrying this bag, you will be treated as if you have impeccable manners."

"So just carrying it gives you good manners?"

"No, you will merely be treated like a well-mannered person. You do not actually gain manners."

"Huuuh…? Well, that's pointless."

"Er, um, you see, about that—the item will briefly prevent you from upsetting anyone with your lack of propriety. It works as a temporary measure, to tide you over."

"Still…"

"Wait, wait. Hold on, now. Think of this as an etiquette tool that will allow you to get away with everything. Surely you realize the benefits it provides, yes? No matter how severe and stubborn an interviewer may be, they will never consider you rude."

"So then shouldn't you just learn your manners properly?"

"Well, that is not the sort of item it is."

"This is for Snow White's birthday, anyway, so I feel like an item for a boss fight is in the wrong direction. She's not the kind of magical girl who has some bad guy she needs to defeat…like the magical girls in *Cutie Healer* or *Star Queen*."

"The good old days are already long behind us. Where there are magical girls, there are battles to be fought. I am certain she will engage in boss fights going forward. Most definitely."

"Boss fights, huh…?" La Pucelle mused. "These don't seem like weapons for fighting bosses, though. Wouldn't you need things that like…shoot beams, or make doppelgängers and stuff?"

"No, no, no, not at all. You never know what or how something will prove useful. It is not completely out of the question that a water-resistant coaster could enable you to beat a powerful boss character. And besides, does it not seem likely that an enemy who influences others' emotions could indeed exist?"

"Ahhh, well, yeah, maybe so."

"Or an enemy with a strong accent, or an enemy who causes you to misunderstand things, or an enemy who is particular about manners."

"Nah, not those."

Magicaloid repeatedly attempted to persuade La Pucelle, despite even thinking herself it was all a little forced, yet La Pucelle stood firm. And so, with great sorrow, Magicaloid offered her another 50 percent discount.

But La Pucelle shook her head and let Magicaloid down easy. "Snow White's gonna show up soon," she said, and she added, "I'll think about whether I need any of these items."

With a sigh, Magicaloid left the steel tower, flying to her goal underneath the gray sky.

At high, high altitude and high speed, she cut across the city, careful to avoid being seen as she descended into a residential area and landed behind a playground. She transformed back into Makoto Andou and entered the small park. The sun had set; the streetlamps glowed a dim, gloomy purple.

Seated on a curved wooden bench beside one of the streetlamps was an elementary school–aged girl.

It seemed she'd kept her promise to wait a little bit. Not long ago, she'd been looking at her feet and crying—she still was. When this was combined with how her long hair spilled over her shoulders as well as with her muted outfit and the dim park lights and streetlights, Makoto thought the girl was really a depressing sight, not that she was in any position to point that out.

Holding back a sigh, Makoto sat down next to the girl. “Sorry. I couldn’t get any money after all.”

The girl’s sobs came in hiccups. She held a crushed, muddied cardboard box, and inside—well, it was easy to tell what had become of the contents. She’d said it was a birthday present for her mother, a clock she’d bought with her New Year’s allowance.

On the way back from her part-time job at the convenience store, Makoto had been lost in thought, pondering how she could use her magical-girl identity to make money, so she’d neglected to pay attention to her surroundings. She’d ended up accidentally bumping shoulders with this girl, which had caused her to drop the box with the clock inside, sending it rolling into the street before it got crushed by a passing truck. That incident brought them to the present moment.

With some consoling and wheedling, Makoto had managed to get the girl to explain: Today was her mother’s birthday, and she had to give her a present before the day was over. She didn’t have the money to replace the clock; neither did Makoto. She’d put the money she’d wrangled from Sister Nana into a fixed deposit, and now that it was past four o’clock, she couldn’t withdraw any more cash until the next day.

Borrow money from someone, then? That would run counter to Makoto’s beliefs. No way.

So she’d wondered if she could exchange something for money, and she had hit on an idea: take the magic items she’d thrown together after producing a weird futuristic gadget the other day and sell them to another magical girl. But that had failed, too. Maybe the time crunch had made her impatient and sullied her sales pitch; perhaps La Pucelle’s stinginess was to blame, or perhaps the items weren’t right for Snow White in the first place. But the little girl was still crying.

Makoto would’ve rather abandoned her and fled, but she couldn’t do that. Biting her lip, she rose to her feet. In her hand was an undyed cotton bag. She pulled a notepad and pen from her pocket, jotted down some instructions, then dropped the note into the bag. “If you promise you’ll never tell anyone…how about I give you some good stuff?”

The girl looked up, tears still streaming down her face. Makoto wondered if this was what a cry for help looked like.

◇◇◇

One week later…

While walking back from her convenience store job, Makoto was pondering how she might quit her job to make a living purely from being a magical girl when someone called out to her from behind. She turned to see a familiar little girl. Makoto looked around, but there was nobody else nearby. The girl was looking straight at her and wearing a bright orange backpack.

"Me?" asked Makoto.

"Thanks for before, miss." The girl bowed her head with a swish of her long hair.

Oh, Makoto thought, *it's that girl from the other day.* She'd only ever seen her face streaked with tears, so she hadn't realized. The girl came off a lot cheerier with her backpack on and her hair in a ponytail. Or maybe it was more her cheery expression.

"My mom really loves those presents," the girl said.

"Huh? Really? She does?"

"Well, yeah, they're amazing!"

"I mean, maybe they are amazing, but there's no way she has any real use for them, right?"

"Nuh-uh, she really does. She uses the coaster to get water off the vegetables and wring the laundry dry. It's got some sort of special material in it, right?"

Now that the girl said so, Makoto realized, *Huh, that's definitely one way to use it.*

"When my mom's sleeping, my brother… He's only two, and sometimes he pulls her hair, and she didn't know what to do with him. But when she put on those stickers, he stopped pulling."

"Ohhh, I see."

"And she said since she started putting her plans for the month into that folder, stuff doesn't slip her mind anymore. She's really forgetful, so she was always getting worked up about remembering things." The girl giggled cheerfully. "And she also said she made a really good impression on the PTA when she brought that cotton bag to a meeting."

"Aha, that makes sense."

"And ever since she put that one sticker on her credit card, she feels like she's been wasting less money."

"Maybe that's the right way to use it."

"Oh, but also this." The girl took off her backpack and fished around inside it until she pulled out a notebook. "About this notebook… My mom says accents aren't actually bad things. And that regional dialects disappearing means culture disappearing and stuff. I didn't really get that part."

"That's one way to look at it."

"So she asked me to give it back. Sorry—you were so nice to give it to me."

The girl went on for a while longer about how wonderful the items were, then bowed some more, sending her ponytail swishing back and forth, before she finally left.

On the way back home, Makoto gazed at her reflection in the window of a car parked on the road. It was subtle, but Makoto was smiling, too.

That evening, Magicaloid opened up the notebook, wrote *Fav*, then turned on her magical phone. "Fav, do you have a minute?" she asked.

A black-and-white hologram popped up over the screen. "How may I help you?"

"Ohhh, right… Now I see how…effective this item is, heh. Thank you very much."

"Oh, no, I haven't done a thing worthy of thanks… Is something the matter?"

Magicaloid clutched her stomach, shoulders shaking. Fav's worried question just made her laugh harder until finally it started to hurt. Magicaloid waved a hand. "No, no, I am fine."

No Magical Girls at This Blossom Viewing

This story takes place a while before the *Magical Girl Raising Project* game begins.

Debut

Magical Girl Raising Project School Calendar 2016
(Tsukuru no Mori) bonus short story collection
Magical Girl Raising Project: Circle of Life

No Magical Girls at This Blossom Viewing

She looked up. Above her were branches full of pale-pink cherry blossoms so delicate you could practically see the blue sky through them. A single petal floated slowly, gently, then landed right on Sanae's forehead. It felt as if all the cherry blossoms in full bloom on those branches were looming closer. No matter how beautiful they were, so many of them at once seemed practically grotesque.

She'd never thought about things like this before. It used to be that she'd had piles of things to do that were more important than gazing at or thinking about cherry blossoms. But now, Sanae had the free time to take it easy and watch the petals fall. In other words, she was grumbling about how hard her life was.

After completing her training period, Sanae had been assigned to her first-choice position in a prominent department. She'd become very suddenly motivated. Whittling down on the time she slept, taking moments in between regular work hours, she'd picked out the inefficiencies, large and small. There had been so many areas where they could cut costs, if they just corrected them. She'd organized a plan to cut useless alliances and make the company more efficient and streamlined.

Sanae had been proud of her work. But a week after her assignment, when she'd written up the issues with their current situation, her boss had looked at her like trash. Her ideas had not been adopted, and ever since, she'd wound up clashing with her boss and seniors over every little thing, earning herself a reputation as a problem employee.

It had been her rotten luck to be placed under foolish management. Her boss was an idiot who stubbornly believed in *if it ain't broke, don't fix it*; in his mind, change led to failure. That had led to a bottleneck. Her first step, which should have gotten her foot in the door to a successful career, had instead tossed Sanae into the bowels of hell. Getting transferred to a subsidiary out in the boondocks was clearly not conducive to being promoted to management.

Now that she'd wound up working at the N City office, Sanae was only ever made to do the kind of work anyone could handle. She gritted her teeth through every mundane task until she was eventually asked to stake out a spot for a cherry blossom viewing party.

There had been plenty of irritations in her life back in her school days as well, and those irritations had only increased in number since she'd moved into the workforce. She should have been climbing higher and making her way through narrower gates, but the further she got, the stronger and greater the resistance from those around her. Whether it was a top-tier school or one of the most prominent general trading companies in Japan, there were always incompetents, and they dragged Sanae down.

Ever since childhood, Sanae Mokuou had committed to a life of insisting that what was correct was correct. Her exceptionally strong memory and wits had supported that she was correct. Be it in entrance exams or any sort of qualification exam, Sanae was always a winner. If someone who ranked at the top of the class at the highest educational institute in the country said so, then that made the statement correct. It had always been like that.

But if you asked Sanae if she was a winner now, then the answer would be no.

Perhaps if she could have gone overseas, she would have been judged differently for doing the same things. No—idiots who didn't have what it took to be in a leadership position should never have gotten a management role out of the nasty old custom of age-based promotion in the first place.

Acknowledging that she'd lost because of some idiots was the one thing she absolutely didn't want to do. And after getting a job at a good company fresh out of college, she felt that finding a newer, more entry-level position somewhere would be a loss, too. Though it would have been forgivable if she'd failed due to her own fault, she absolutely couldn't tolerate losing because of idiots. She'd quit her current job whenever it best suited her.

This wasn't stubbornness. She was just a little bit fastidious. She couldn't stand pulling the short straw when she hadn't done anything wrong. It was this fastidiousness that made her always give 110 percent in any work she was assigned—despite her dissatisfaction with her situation, and even when the task was of the sort anyone could do.

If she was asked to pour tea, then she would search online and go to the library to fish around for books to help her figure out a steeping and pouring method that could make cheap tea leaves taste even slightly better. If she was told to make copies, she would read the entire copy machine manual from cover to cover until she was able to handle everything from routine fixes to repairs that even a professional might struggle with.

And securing a spot for cherry blossom viewing was no different. She rode her folding bike around N City to find the best location. The spot had to be obscure, a hidden gem of sorts—but the cherry blossoms still had to be just as beautiful as in the well-known locations, otherwise there was no point. Searching online brought up nothing but the popular spots, so she had to find a place on foot, the old-fashioned way. A merger of cities had made N City ridiculously large, and going around town was really exhausting. Her thighs and calves swelled and her knees shook, and she could hardly stand up at work the next day.

Finding Jounan Park took a lot of time and effort, but it was perfect in every way: centrally located in the middle of downtown, surrounded by buildings like a hole had opened up in that space, and with very few people around. The cherry blossom trees stood a foot or two apart, in full and dense bloom as if competing in height. The space wasn't entirely empty, though. Aside from Sanae, there was a scattering of people who'd put tarps down, but there were far fewer people than in the more central park—few enough that she didn't need to reserve a spot. But she would put her full effort into the task. She would protect this spot with her life until her office closed for the day.

Sure, she knew she was overdoing it a bit.

She shook her head. Negativity would push success further away. Pulling her phone from her bag, she launched an app—the game she'd started recently, *Magical Girl Raising Project.*

Sanae had never once played video games, even as a child. She thought paying money to waste time was stupid. But now Sanae had lots of time, as well as a lot of stress to vent. You might assume she'd still think video games were dumb, but her phone had been in her hand and the game downloaded before she even realized it. And when she gave it a try, the game rewarded her for precisely the amount of effort she put in. It was far kinder than the real world. *So that's why there are always more video game addicts, huh*, she had thought, and considering how she was now, she had to laugh at herself.

Sanae had chosen *Magical Girl Raising Project* entirely because it was free. She was too old to want to be a magical girl; she'd believed that magical girls really existed when she was just a little girl. Back then, Sanae had thought that if you put in the effort, you could become a magical girl, but her current lot in life was proof that wasn't true. In retrospect, maybe that had been Sanae's first failure.

Her phone screen lit up, and a cute magical-girl avatar appeared against a background of a field of tulips. She had her star tiara, eagle scepter, emperor cape, and Cinderella glass slippers—all rare items imposing enough to clear a path wherever her avatar went.

Even in a video game, if she was going to do something, then she'd take it seriously, with full commitment.

Her magical-girl name was Ruler. She'd come up with it from the English word, which meant "commander" or "monarch," but nobody had figured that out. Whenever she opened up the in-game chat and other players saw the name *Ruler*, they only ever said things like, "It sure is convenient to be able to move from one town to another instantly, huh? Oh, but I don't like hitting my head when I use it indoors." And so she regretted picking it, figuring she should have given herself a name that even idiots could understand, but *Magical Girl Raising Project* didn't let you change your name.

Sanae was surrounded by idiots wherever she went. Most of the world was made up of fools.

Today was Friday, and a new in-game event was about to begin—in roughly thirty seconds or so. First, she would check what the event was; if she could do it solo, she'd immediately speed through the entire thing, and if she needed help, she'd create a party with the fewest people possible and take the lead that afternoon. Ruler's costume made it clear that she was a capable player. Recruiting party members would net her a veritable flood of candidates, and she would just select whoever seemed most useful.

Even if they were idiots or incompetents, if they had rare magic abilities or strong combat abilities, they would make good pawns.

An excellent leader at the helm would enable them to perform above their capabilities.

The moment she opened up the window to start the event, the activation sound effect blared, startling her. But that couldn't have happened; Sanae always played *Magical Girl Raising Project* on silent. If anyone ever saw her doing something so juvenile as playing a video game at her age, the shame would kill her.

She looked around to make sure no one had heard her and then discovered the source of the sound. A woman on a nearby bench was staring intently at her smartphone. The light projected on her face was from *Magical Girl Raising Project.* Sanae had been waiting for the event to start so she could activate her mission, and the woman's phone must've made the activation sound at almost the same moment, making Sanae think it was her own phone.

The middle-aged woman sitting on the bench was an absolute sight—legs splayed wide, she wore a leopard-print long-sleeved T-shirt and hardly any makeup; she had a nasty look in her eyes, dyed brown hair with her black roots showing, and a One Cup sake in her hand. Had Sanae realized a woman like her was nearby, she would've picked a spot somewhere else. It seemed the woman had arrived after Sanae, sitting herself down on that bench at some point.

I hope she leaves before the blossom viewing starts, Sanae thought, and since she didn't want to get involved with the woman, she quickly averted her eyes.

The woman was also playing *Magical Girl Raising Project*, but Sanae felt no affinity with her. *Free stuff always attracts the dregs of society. That's why you see so many idiots, even in video games.*

When Sanae took a quick look around, she saw most of the people who'd come for the cherry blossoms were gazing not at the flowers but at their phone screens.

The one sitting on the bench next to the middle-aged woman was a boy of about middle school age, also on his phone. Judging from his hairstyle, his build, his vibe, and also from the soccer ball at his feet, this boy was a jock, but he was fully engrossed in his phone.

A little ways away, there was a tall girl leaning against a cherry tree. She wore the uniform of a prep school that was fairly prestigious in this city; she, too, was absorbed in her phone.

And that kid over there was in the uniform of a private elementary school. She looked as if she was still only in first or second grade, so was it okay for her to be on her phone instead of playing with friends? Just what were her parents doing?

And past her was a young couple—

Whoa.

Sanae couldn't help but gasp, doing a double take. Atop a one-person picnic blanket were a couple pressed right up against each other. They were looking at each other's phones, whispering and smiling, being incredibly mushy in a way that would normally gross Sanae out, but the man was absolutely gorgeous. He had a slim build and a slightly feminine allure that wafted from the charming smile on his lips.

Not many pop stars or actors were *that* beautiful. If Sanae had a man like him by her side, whispering things like, *"No one else has to know what a catch you are,"* or *"I have more fun looking at you than the flowers,"* even a mundane task like picking a cherry blossom viewing spot would be a thrill.

Being careful not to stare, Sanae enjoyed the eye candy, and then, as an afterthought, also looked over toward the woman next to him. She was plain, with the kind of face you'd find anywhere—the type who'd call herself plus size, but then people would call her fat behind her back.

Right when Sanae had been in such a good mood, now she was mad again. The world was unfair and unreasonable. Things weren't the way they should be. Her irritation grew. She came back around to wondering why she had to be in a place like this, and that got her angry again.

"Hey, lady."

Sanae spun around with a start, worried that she was going to be accused of staring at the couple and that she'd never recover from the shame. But when she looked to see who'd just spoken to her, those fears vanished. It was a girl in middle or high school. She wore a shirt with some character on it Sanae didn't recognize and a basic blue knit cap. Her bright manicure further contributed to Sanae's impression that the girl was ridiculously simple—not just in looks, but probably in mind, too.

"Staking out a spot to view the cherry blossoms?" the girl asked. "Sheesh, it's rough working for the man, huh?"

Even her tone was frivolous. Sanae glared at the girl. "…What is it? You need something?"

"I could hold your place for you. Three hundred yen for one hour."

Ridiculous. How was she supposed to trust someone she'd only just met? Sanae could envision the whole scenario: She'd pay the three hundred yen, and then while she was off somewhere else, the girl would vanish, and the spot would get stolen, and Sanae's coworkers wouldn't trust her.

Sanae tried to shoo the girl away, but the girl persisted. "I'll even give you a discount: two hundred fifty yen. How about it?" Sanae continued waving her off until the girl finally gave up and picked a different target—a young man, maybe a corporate worker or a bureaucrat. He looked bewildered as she engaged him in conversation.

But seriously, everyone here was on their phones. Sanae wasn't one to point fingers, but she wondered if this was actually a good thing. Honestly, it probably wasn't.

Then there was that girl over there who looked slightly zoned out; she was across from two women who appeared to be university students—they looked so similar from behind, it was uncanny. Were they twins or something? Matching outfits and hairstyles were tacky, even for twins. All three of them were looking at their phones.

"I *just* told you. You're such a dummy, Sumi."

"Why d'you say stuff like that, Yocchan?"

The three middle school girls didn't have phones in their hands; they didn't seem to be doing much of anything other than chatting pleasantly as they passed through the park.

Yep, this place was full of idiots. Even as they were surrounded by cherry blossoms in full bloom, they were all more enthused about the game.

Hypocritically forgetting how she herself had judged the cherry blossoms as grotesque, Sanae mentally cursed and glared at everyone, and then she noticed someone not looking at their phone.

It was a girl in her late teens, her brown hair tied in a braid. In her hands was a lacquered box. Dressed in a varsity jacket and distressed jeans, she came off like a hick who was a little rough around the edges, but the box she carried was rather elegant. The clash between attire and box caught Sanae's attention. She watched the girl for a while; the girl happened to turn toward Sanae, and their eyes met.

Sanae felt like looking away would be shallow. She was prepared for the girl to snap at her—*"What're you lookin' at, ya punk?"*—but contrary to her expectations, the girl beamed. Sanae maintained a sullen expression.

But the girl didn't seem bothered or put off by it. She ambled over to Sanae and held out the box. "Want some, lady? It's tasty."

She then opened the box to reveal its contents: rolled omelets, rice with bamboo shoots, boiled broccoli rabe, and stewed daikon and mackerel, each dish placed in its own section. The eggs looked fluffy and soft, the black and white sesame in the rice dish made her mouth water, and the mackerel shone a golden brown.

The sight and aroma made her hungry. It all looked so good, but Sanae couldn't keep a nasty remark to herself.

"...Ugh, you're trying way too hard to be seasonal." As soon as she'd said it, Sanae regretted it—she was just taking her frustration out on this girl.

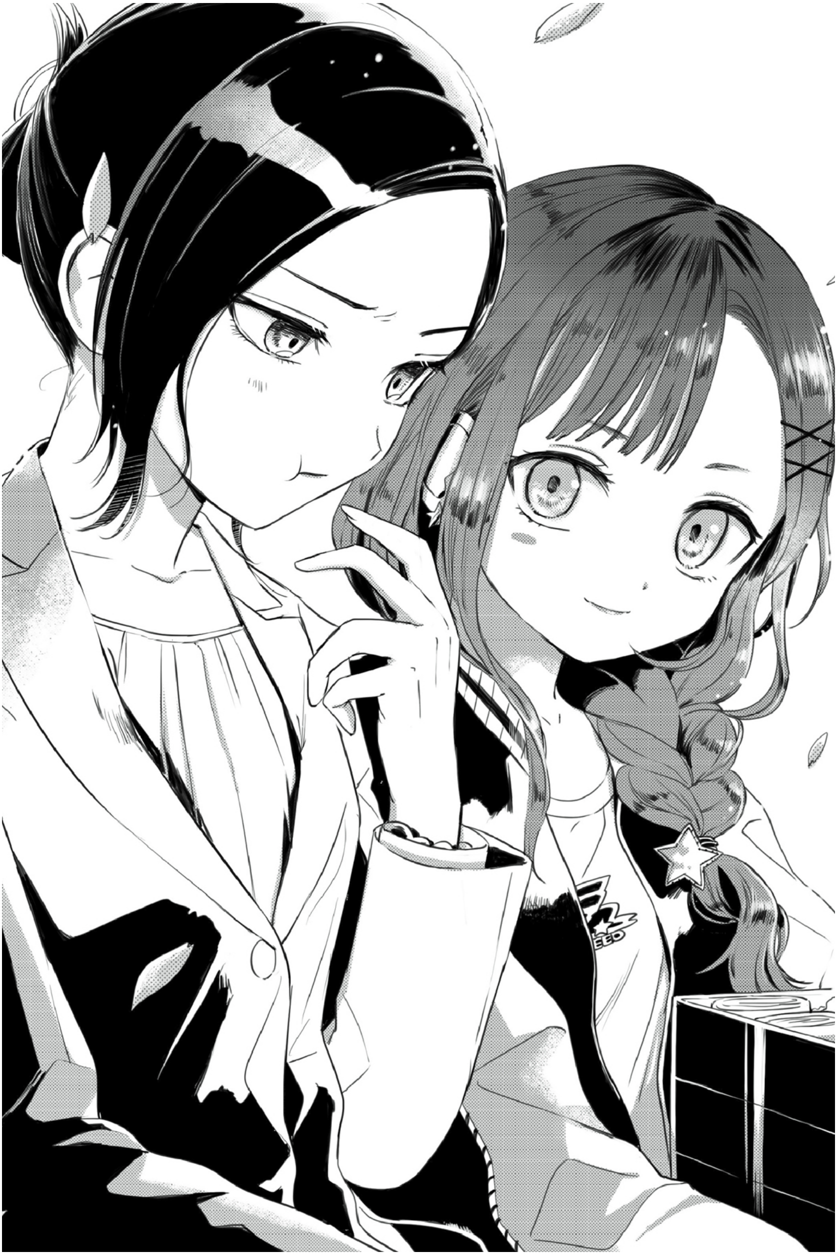
But the girl wasn't upset. She laughed, and seeing that made Sanae feel petty in comparison, which in turn made her angry all over again.

"Well, the deli made it," the girl said. "Spring food tastes extra good in the springtime, besides."

Sanae felt like eating any of it herself would be a cheap move on her part, but more importantly—it looked delicious. She covered her mouth and gently cleared her throat. "I'll just have one, then," she said, and popped a rolled omelet into her mouth. She wiped her fingers with a moist towelette as she chewed the food. Delicious.

"Still good stuff, even with all these sketchy cherry blossoms around."

The girl's remark made Sanae frown. "Is there something particularly noteworthy about these cherry blossoms?"



"Yeah, apparently there's some creepy stories about 'em. Y'know how there's people who can, like, see things that most people can't see, that sort of sixth-sense stuff? These cherry blossoms only attract folks with a really strong sixth sense. That's the rumor."

Sanae looked around.

The couple was still flirting. The middle-aged woman was lying down on the bench, smartphone in one hand, sake in the other. The college students were chattering on loudly to each other, and the tall high school girl was in silent concentration. The little girl was on the bench, swinging her legs as she was on her phone, and the soccer boy was the same. The dazed-looking girl was zoning out, staring at her screen. The sketchy girl who'd offered to keep Sanae's place was sitting on her knees, head hanging, in front of the man in a suit who looked like he worked at some company or government office. It seemed she was being lectured.

Sanae surveyed the entire park one more time, then nodded. "Well, I don't think anyone in this park, myself included, has that sort of…sixth sense, or magic powers, or any unusual abilities."

"Aw, c'mon! You never know!" The girl grinned happily, which kind of ticked Sanae off again.

Why's this girl still acting so chummy with me when we don't even know each other? Sanae took a swig of her mineral water, then reached out for the stewed mackerel.

Trick or Magical Girl

This story takes place shortly before the events of *Magical Girl Raising Project*.

Debut

Magical Girl Raising Project Fanbook
(Tsukuru no Mori)

Trick or Magical Girl

Was it so strange to believe only what she saw with her own eyes, what she experienced personally?

"That's just antirealism!"

"You're trying to use a new word you learned in a sentence, aren't you?"

The free mobile phone game *Magical Girl Raising Project* turned one in every few ten thousand players into a real magical girl…or so went the rumors kids whispered among themselves. Nobody knew where these rumors had come from, and at first, anyone with common sense had laughed them off as tall tales that only small children would believe.

But then the website compiling info on magical-girl sightings had popped up, and once more eyewitnesses came forward, the situation changed. One girl claimed that she was a magical girl herself; another said she'd saved someone using superhuman feats of strength; one had flown through the sky, another had burrowed through the earth—these stories kept coming and coming, and then when it reached the point where someone brought up that "the costume of that girl who was sighted can be reproduced in *Magical Girl Raising Project*," all of N City became awash in magical-girl fervor.

This girl's lively friend, Sumire, was a bit of a dreamer, and her other friend, Koyuki, had the same tendencies, in a head-in-the-clouds sort of way. The two of them talked about magical girls as if they took it for granted they were real.

And they weren't the only ones. The hamburger shop the three friends visited on the way home after school was constantly packed with middle school students, all of whom were talking about magical girls.

Yoshiko Yoshinoura might be the only person in N City who wasn't interested in magical girls. She sighed, then bit into one of her fries. It was already cold, and it was too salty. "There's obviously no such thing as magical girls."

"With this many people who say they've seen them, then they've got to be real," Sumire retorted.

Yoshiko wasn't against occult stuff on principle. She was open-minded enough that if some supernatural creature appeared—a spirit or Buddha or *yokai* or fairy or person with superpowers or *chupacabra* or Sasquatch or the Loch Ness Monster or a little green man or magical girl—and told her that it really existed, then she would believe in it. Unlike the first victim in a horror movie, she could believe that monsters were real.

But no such mysterious beings had appeared before Yoshiko. All she ever saw was Sumire and Koyuki talking about magical girls. So there was no need to believe in them. There was something else more important they should be doing.

"Sumi," said Yoshiko, "shouldn't you be worrying about finals instead of magical girls?"

"Hey! Don't bring that up, Yocchan! I'm doing my best to avoid reality here."

Saying, "I wonder if magical girls have to study for tests, too…," Koyuki may have been listening, and maybe not.

But Sumire went on passionately: "Magic can solve anything. I saw it in an anime when I was a kid, so it has to be true."

"I bet the people who believed in the Nostradamus prophecies at the turn of the century were like that, too," Yoshiko shot back.

"This stuff really is true, okay! You just reject that stuff out of hand, Yocchan. So that makes you low sensitivity and keeps you from having encounters."

"Um, rude much?"

"I think you must've passed by a magical girl before, or something like that. But you've been ignoring that stuff without even realizing it. Listen, hasn't anything strange happened to you?"

"Anything strange, huh…?" When Yoshiko had fallen asleep while playing *Magical Girl Raising Project*, a magical girl had appeared in her dream. She'd been in pajamas, sprawled out on a fluffy cloud as she said things like, "I don't wanna do wooooork," making Yoshiko want to give her a kick. But that had been a dream. Not reality.

She went over all her memories, top to bottom, digging them up. Thinking back on everything she could remember, she came to a conclusion.

Swallowing the fry in her mouth, Yoshiko raised her head. “There’s no such thing as magical girls.”

“Huh? Where’d that come from?” said Sumire.

“The world is actually a pretty boring place. There’s no mysterious happenings or mysterious things. Keeping your feet on the ground and living a decent life is what’ll make you happiest. It’s best to stick with what’s reliable.”

“Don’t tell me boring things like that!”

Sumire whined and griped, and Koyuki gave her a look, too, with this expression like she had something to say.

But still, Yoshiko thought—as long as she never saw one herself, in real life, then they might as well not exist.

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Parting ways with her two friends at the hamburger place, Yoshiko took her usual route home. She hurried back. The sun set early in autumn, and she didn’t want to run into any sketchy characters in the lonelier parts of town. Streetlamps lit the way through fields of rice and other crops. The only sound was her own footsteps. It was best to get through places like these quickly.

Maybe you could blame her friends for talking about supernatural stuff, but she was in more of a hurry than usual. She kept imagining nasty things, like something appearing out of the darkness. She picked up her pace a little, and before she even had the time to be startled, she found her foot stuck in a storm drain.

She staggered and almost fell, but her hand touched a wall, and she somehow kept herself up.

Huh? A wall? Since when is there a wall…?

“Are you all right?” At just the perfect moment, that voice called out from behind her, startling her enough to make her jump.

Putting one hand to her pounding heart, Yoshiko turned to see a young woman wearing a coat with many belts.

She looked like she was around high school age. Even in the dim alleyway, her features were startlingly beautiful, so maybe she was a magical girl…but on second glance, no magical girl would walk around in an outfit as ordinary as a coat and scarf. She had a pumpkin pin on her lapel, which reminded Yoshiko, *Oh yeah, it’s* *almost Halloween.*

But there was something about her that stuck out more than her beauty. She was holding a wrapped bundle. It was massive—you could probably fit a person in there.

"Oh yes. I'm fine. Nothing to worry about," said Yoshiko.

"Ah, good."

Examining the girl's face again, Yoshiko saw she really was beautiful. Her gaze then turned to the cloth-wrapped bundle. What she could see peeking out from underneath was…a pumpkin. If that whole bundle was a pumpkin, then just how heavy was it? Heavier than a grown man?

The girl seemed to notice Yoshiko's gaze; she also looked at the bundle in her hands and awkwardly scratched her cheek. "It's for Halloween."

"Ah, right. Halloween…"

"And fall is the season of appetites, too. Eating this much will really throw any diet to the wind, though."

Appetite? She's gonna eat it? That entire pumpkin?

The woman in the coat trotted away, her footsteps so light that it was hard to imagine the bundle in her arms was heavy. Yoshiko watched her go in a daze, then suddenly remembered that wall. Come to think of it, she wasn't leaning against anything now. She looked to her right, then to her left, and even behind her, but no such wall existed.

Yoshiko was reminded of what Sumire had said before, but she shook it off. That encounter *had* felt a little odd, but it wasn't anything mysterious. It could all be explained. She must've only *thought* her hand had been on a wall, when in fact, she'd just been leaning on the guardrail.

Lost in such thoughts as she made her way through downtown N City, she found there was a Halloween fair going on.

She stopped by the stationery store to buy some lead for her mechanical pencil, and then, when she came out of the shop, there was a witch. Yes, a witch. And a total cookie-cutter one, at that: dressed in all black with a big pointed hat, a broom in her right hand, and golden hair in two braided pigtails.

Yoshiko was momentarily startled before she remembered: *Oh, right, it's for Halloween.* She wondered if cosplayers like this witch came here voluntarily, or if she had been hired by the shopping district to come here. If it was the latter, that was a surprising level of financial muscle for this declining shopping district.

The witch was facing away from her, so Yoshiko couldn't see her face. But her costume was pretty high quality, and she was just like a real witch. Right as Yoshiko passed by her, she heard the witch talking to someone on her phone.

"It's just like Magicaloid said—even when walkin' around in the middle of the day, they'll ignore ya 'cause it's Halloween. Sister Nana told me even Winterprison's in her Halloween getup today. You get your butt over here, too, Ripple. Otherwise I'll come pick ya up."

What did she mean, they walked around in the middle of the day? Didn't cosplayers normally do that? Was she saying they were just pretending to be cosplayers as they took advantage of Halloween to go around outside?

Yoshiko hurriedly hid behind a sign at the nearby butcher and watched what the witch was up to. She was still on her phone. A high schooler approached her for a handshake, which the witch returned. She was a far cry from the dark image of the word "witch"—she fit in perfectly at the shopping arcade under the sunset.

The witch's phone call continued for a while before she eventually finished and tucked her phone in her pocket. Then she looked around the area and ran into an alley. Yoshiko crept after her. She was struck by how the witch had looked all around, seemingly worried that people might see her.

There was something going on. Yoshiko couldn't lose sight of her. Trying to keep the witch from getting away, Yoshiko pursued her with a little too much haste, and when she leaped into the alley, she nearly collided with the witch as she was bursting out from it. Yoshiko didn't have time to think about dodging, and she was too shocked to move out of the way. As she just stood there, frozen, the approaching witch's pretty face pulled into an expression of surprise, and right as they were about to crash, she twisted her body somehow to avoid a direct collision, narrowly avoiding Yoshiko, even in the narrow alley. With a gust of wind, the witch passed her by.

After a pause of almost ten seconds, Yoshiko heaved a deep sigh. She was lifting her right hand to wipe the sweat from her forehead when she noticed something. The bag she thought she'd been holding had vanished.

"Whoops, sorry!"

That voice…had come from above. Yoshiko's attention turned upward, and right as her head was turning, her schoolbag came down on her. She somehow caught it in both hands. A moment later, she looked up again, but there was nothing above her save the narrow slice of sky sandwiched between two shops.

Why had her bag fallen from above? Had there been some way to move up to the roof in that instant, other than by flying? Could she even say that girl had really been flying? Maybe she'd faked it by using wires or something. Yeah, that had to be it. It was a sleight of hand. A trick. Since she was in a witch costume, she had to at least be able to fake flying. She was just that serious about cosplaying. That was it. It had to be.

As Yoshiko was attempting to somehow gather her thoughts, she must have stopped paying attention to her surroundings. It seemed she'd totally missed her turn, and she'd been walking on and on. By the time she started wondering why she was dragging herself along the path up this hill that wasn't the way home, she was already far from her destination. And having been confused to begin with, now she was further disconcerted. She took three deep breaths. *It's okay. I know this place.* This was Monzenmachi, where there were a lot of temples; she'd just come right up to the top of the hill and was about to hit the national highway. Right now, she was in front of a ruined temple.

A temple…?

She shivered from the cold. Not because the weather was growing chill with the approach of night. This was the chill of an abandoned building, and this was a temple, which made it even worse. Behind her was the hill.

Maybe it was back in elementary school that she'd once heard that the temple atop the hill in Monzenmachi was haunted. The stories said the ghost was an old woman who'd tried to visit a grave here, then fallen from the top of the hill and died. Yoshiko had scoffed at the story, but she couldn't laugh now. When she looked down on the hill from above, the drop was bigger than she'd thought. If she were to fall from here—

Remembering strange things made her feel particularly cold. She couldn't stay here too long. The sun had already set, and it was getting dark. She'd go home quickly, via her usual route. Looking toward the path, Yoshiko froze.

Right in the middle of the road was a girl's severed head.

Wait, no—it wasn't a severed head. There wasn't a single drop of blood anywhere. It had to be a mannequin head. This was just a nasty prank. Sure, it was Halloween, but you had to draw the line somewhere. What would the prankster do if such a sight startled a driver and caused an accident?

Despite managing to convince herself of this rationally, Yoshiko still didn't want to get near that head. She had to go put the head off to the side of the road, at least, but her legs wouldn't move.

Right as her heart was hammering unbearably hard, the head turned to face Yoshiko.

The girl's head, which had headphones over its ears, opened its eyes, staring at Yoshiko. Yoshiko could hear a shriek—her own shriek. She hadn't even been aware she was the one screaming. Now she really had had too much. Her vision was fading into white. Her consciousness grew dim. She tried to run, but her foot knocked into the curb, and she lost her balance.

She was going to fall straight backward. She was going to fall, without even the time to think about catching herself. She was at the top of a hill. She would meet the same fate as the old woman who'd come to visit a grave and had fallen. This was a really steep slope. Even if she was young, she wouldn't make it out in one piece. She'd be lucky if she just broke a bone or two. *Ugh, this is it.* She closed her eyes. How much time passed like that? Weird; she wasn't falling to the ground at all. Still fully arched backward, Yoshiko's body was defying gravity, unmoving.

When she opened her eyes a crack, she was startled by a couple of faces right in front of her.

Two identical angels were giggling and holding Yoshiko by the arms. Come to think of it, she'd seen something like this before. It came up a lot in reruns of classic anime, like when there was a particularly emotional anime special or whatever. The boy Nello, satisfied at being able to see a Rubens painting, had risen to the heavens with his dog, Patrasche. And there had been a bunch of angels with him…

Wait—am I gonna die?!

Perhaps it was the thought that she didn't want to die yet, the desire to live on, that got the blood circulating in her hazy mind, and she regained her grasp on reality. She tried to shake the angels off her, but they wouldn't let go.

"Just in time, huh, lady?"

"Phew, what a relief. I thought this was gonna be a magi-cool disaster."

The two angels set Yoshiko down on the side of the road, then finally let go of her arms. She was relieved that they'd let go, but also disturbed. What had just happened? She looked every which way, but there was no one else around. Yoshiko was all alone on the road under the light of the streetlamps. The head she thought she'd seen was gone, too.

There was nobody. There were no angels, either. She could hear some girls talking.

"Swim, you idiot! I know I said you could go into town in that outfit, but of course you'll startle people if you show them your powers! You can't do just anything you want all because it's Halloween! Good grief, nothing but trouble…"

"I thought I had to do tricks since it's Halloween."

"You don't have to do that. I'll give you some treats…"

Their voices grew distant.

What was that all about? Yoshiko didn't think she was imagining things. The sensation in her arms had been vivid and had clearly felt real. If those angels had actually grabbed her, then had she almost ascended to heaven? When she glanced at her right hand, she was clasping a white feather.

Yoshiko trembled slightly and, hugging her schoolbag, hurried home.

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Several days later, Sumire was again insisting that "magical girls are real, okay?!" Yoshiko denied it as usual, but she did add just one thing: "I'm willing to concede that angels are real."

The Making of
Magical Girl Raising Project

This story takes place before the events of *Magical Girl Raising Project restart*.

Debut

Magical Girl Raising Project Fanbook
(Tsukuru no Mori)

The Making of *Magical Girl Raising Project*

Could the magical girls who had been selected through the exams held by Cranberry, Musician of the Forest—otherwise known as "Cranberry's children"—truly be proper magical girls?

Shouldn't the Magical Kingdom go beyond just revising the current exam system and also make sure those girls were formally reexamined, to strictly review their suitability as magical girls?

During the inquiry, the magical girl Keek had proposed such a reexamination plan, but the Magical Kingdom had not accepted her proposal. Its pretext was that it was going to treat the children purely as victims.

The response had been sloppy. The Magical Kingdom would not dig up the children's memories or treat their wounds. But it should be indirectly making a strict check to see if there were any problems. To Keek, this was a matter for indignation: She would assert that if you were not a proper magical girl, then you were not a magical girl at all.

After raging and lamentation at the evils of the times, Keek strengthened her resolve. Even if the Magical Kingdom would stand by and do nothing, *she* couldn't let this matter go. Even if she was all on her own, she would give this group a new exam. She swore as much to herself. Her magic, absolute freedom within cyberspace, would make it possible.

Regardless, she couldn't carry out that plan immediately. Everything in life requires preparation. Despite her being at her absolute peak of raging indignation, preliminary work would be essential for holding an exam, so even as she grumbled about it, Keek started programming *Magical Girl Raising Project*. She was trying to create a game to be the stage for her exam.

Since it was too much hassle to do it all on her own, she also had Fal, the digital fairy mascot that she'd modified herself, help her out.

While Fal felt this was a job worth doing, it was also a lot of pressure.

Making an exam in which the life of each and every girl would be on the line was a serious matter, but that wasn't all. Once everything was over, and it was all exposed to the Magical Kingdom, Fal's master, Keek, would probably have her qualifications as a magical girl stripped from her. That was how determined she was—she was ready to throw away her position and status to face this.

Failure was absolutely not an option.

"You handle the testing and debugging for the parts that are done, Fal. I'll finish up the rest," Keek told her mascot.

"Master, is it a good idea to make it in RPG format, pon? An RPG will place more weight on combat," Fal pointed out.

"Ahh… Wellll, they need a minimal level of strength, right? We can just check things like cooperation, consideration, and wisdom by sticking in puzzley sorts of events and mini-games and stuff, right?"

"Events and mini-games, pon?"

"I'll leave those minor details up to you. You can use the simulator all you like. I've programmed it to reproduce personality quirks and abilities in super-high detail, so it should be useful."

"If it reproduces things so well, then why not just use the simulator to reexamine everyone, pon?"

"There are certain *subtleties* you can't determine with just a simulator, you know…probably. Look, just get back to work. It's never gonna get done if you just goof off and run your mouth."

Keek had devised the general rules of *Magical Girl Raising Project*: The Evil King would pose as one of the magical girls, with both parties pitted against each other, and whoever was left standing would be the winner.

The player side had many people, but there was only one Evil King. The surviving magical girl would be forced to fight a lonely battle all by herself, so that did put her at a disadvantage, but Keek was okay with that.

With Cranberry's children on the magical-girl side and Cranberry's ally as the Evil King, maybe it was more accurate to call the Evil King a device for appraisal than a participant in the game.

If they could defeat Cranberry's ally, then you could say that

Cranberry's children had graduated…had to be what that meant. Keek didn't say out loud what her true intentions were, but Fal thought that was what it was.

Keek's library had saved the virtual personality data for real magical girls both past and present. There was such a vast amount saved, even just making a catalog of it in the real world would require a supercomputer. For use with this test, Keek had selected the data of over a hundred of the magical girls connected with Cranberry, and then she'd transferred the authority to manage it to Fal.

When a master was putting in this much effort, the mascot also had to do its part. With renewed vigor, Fal set the situation and difficulty level and shoved sixteen randomly chosen magical girls into the simulator.

The result was that all of them cleared the game.

Maybe this game was a bit too easy.

Fal adjusted the difficulty level of the event one more time and ran the simulator again.

All of them still cleared it.

On closer inspection, for some reason, the Evil King and the magical girls were all finishing the game. But they were supposed to have conflicting conditions for completion—so why was this happening?

Was there an error in the settings, or was there some kind of game-breaking bug? Fal was moved by a sense of duty. If Fal were to find issues here, that would be a great achievement for his master. Keek would surely praise him.

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"Master, there's a bit of a problem, pon."

"What sort of problem?"

"One particular magical girl ruins the game whenever she participates, pon."

"Ruins the game…? It's not the kind of game one person can ruin, though."

"Somehow, after just a little time passes—say, thirty minutes or an hour—everyone becomes her friend, pon."

"Her friend…? Uh, *what*?"

"Everyone becomes friends, including the Evil King, and then they start talking about defeating the master… Does this simulator really give accurate results, pon?"

"Yeah, *I* made it. So who's this nitwit magical girl?"

"It's Tot Pop…"

"Why're you having *Tot Pop* participate? She's not one of the children or anything."

"But her data was in the simulator. She's tagged as being connected to them, pon."

"Well, I guess that's an error. I don't think she's connected to any of it… In any case, exclude her from everything. She *always* ruins stuff when she's around."

"Ohhh, she's that sort of person, pon?"

"Yeah, basically. Anyway, just check over the data again to make sure only people connected to the Musician are in there."

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After erasing Tot Pop's data, Fal booted up the simulator again, thinking that now it'd start working properly. But the game ended without losing a single player, and Fal sighed. Just what was going on this time?

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"Master, when Snow White's in the group, the game doesn't work, pon."

"Huh? Snow White?"

"She hears that the Evil King is in trouble and figures out the rules of the game faster than anyone, and then she convinces everyone, Evil King included, to go to beat the master, pon."

"Why does Snow White have to be in there?"

"Isn't she one of Cranberry's children, too?"

"What the *heck* is up with you? Are you mocking Snow White? Snow White is the hero who defeated Cranberry! She'd never need to take another exam! Agh, seriously!”

“Also, with Detec Bell, depending on how she uses her magic, it can be quite a hassle…”

“Then just put some kind of restrictions on it.”

“But isn’t it unfair to restrict only one person’s magic, pon?”

“Whatever, it doesn’t matter.”

“It *does* matter, pon.”

“Agh, come on… When there’s a problem with character balance, you make adjustments. That’s the basics of game design. Snow White is excluded, *duh*, and Detec Bell’s magic needs nerfing. So get to it.”

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So Fal transferred Snow White’s data elsewhere and also made some modifications that put restrictions on Detec Bell’s magic. Now, that should have eliminated all the problems. After inputting the data, Fal ran the simulation.

The result was that the game ground to a halt yet again, and Fal weakly hung his head.

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“Master, game progress comes to a stop during the footrace mini-event… What do we do about this, pon?”

“Why does *that* happen?”

“Marika Fukuroi says, *‘Well, all the other participants should just be made so they can’t run,’* and she punches out every single magical girl she sees, pon.”

“Just make it so she loses due to foul play.”

“And then Archfiend Pam butts in, saying, *‘A sport only truly comes into being when all three elements of the holy trinity are present… Technique alone, strength alone, or spirit alone will not give rise to harmony.’*”

“Sheesh, what a pain in the butt.”

“And then the other Archfiend Cram School people and Cranberry join in, too, and they start up a brutal race where they head for the goal while attacking and obstructing their opponents, pon."

"No, no, no, no! Why is Cranberry in there?! She is *definitely* Musician related! But I'm not gonna examine her! And wait, you *can't* examine her anymore, anyway!"

"Ohhh, that's true, pon."

"Remove her, obviously, and the rest of the Archfiend Cram School crowd. I can't stand those guys… I just can't handle their jock enthusiasm."

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With the elder magical girls all cut out, now Cranberry's children had to fight purely among themselves.

In the simulator, Pfle took the position of overall leader, while Akane operated as a subleader. Pfle had been born into a family of exceptional wealth, with lots of opportunity to give orders to people below her, and she was quick-witted, so she was perfect for the role of leader. And it made sense for Akane to be number two, since she'd captained a national-level kendo club as well as fulfilled a mediator-like role at home.

Fal was thinking that with this lineup, things had a good chance of going pretty well, when all too soon, the whole party was wiped out.

Not because the Evil King had won or anything like that—all the magical girls had gotten game overs because of monster encounters.

Fal ran the simulation again, but it didn't change the results. No matter how many times the simulation was run, it was always the same party wipe. At a spot where Fal had thought they'd been easily clearing it thus far, they were hit with unrecoverable losses of many party members, leading to their stalling out in the game.

Wondering why this was happening, Fal suddenly figured it out. Since he'd removed all the current and former members of the Archfiend Cram School, the overall combat level of the participants had been greatly reduced, which made the monsters more of a threat.

In this game, the monsters were ultimately just extras. The main event was supposed to be the Evil King versus the magical girls—so they couldn’t let everyone get wiped out by monsters.

Fal had to redo it all, starting from adjusting the difficulty.

The robots resisted even nuclear strikes, so Fal reduced their defense as well as the attack power of satellite-to-earth beams. Fal also made changes to the wild monsters, like turning the *oni* into goblins and shrinking the dragons. Now there was just the boss.

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“Master…”

“Whoa, what’s up with you? You look kinda sick. Like, gray and black instead of black and white.”

“Well, um…fixing monster strength and spawn numbers and special abilities and encounter rates and drop items…everything, basically, just took some time…”

“Ahh, workin’ hard, huh? Thanks.”

“Eventually, Fal ran into another wall, pon.”

“Huh? Why?”

“The Great Dragon is supposed to be strong enough that if you just challenge it directly, you’ll lose, but with information and items, you can win, right, pon?”

“Yeah, that’s right. If they’re the kind of idiots who won’t even notice proper hints, then it’s game over.”

“Once they defeat the Great Dragon, then Nonako Miyokata can control it, though…”

“Ah…”

“The Evil King’s castle was destroyed from the outside, pon…”

“That’s…not good, huh? Anyway, let’s just make it so the Great Dragon can’t be controlled.”

“Huh? So then we change the basics of the Great Dragon, pon? We rebuild the program from square one, pon?”

“Well, that depends on how you work it. Just figure it out somehow. It’s not like we have all the time in the world, here.”

“Pon…”

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Fal made the entrance and exit of the Great Dragon’s spawn location narrower to prevent it from getting outside.

And now that Fal was looking things over again, some players’ powers could be dangerous depending on how they were used. Fal decided to focus on simulating those. So the mascot bumped up the magical girls’ imagination settings by three levels. This should make their virtual personalities perform at a higher level with more flexibility, doing their absolute best to finish the game.

The higher imagination settings made all their basic combat tactics suddenly more polished. Fal discovered that magical girls who had ranged attacks were far too effective, and the danger that they’d take enemy fire from a distance was far too low.

Long-range attackers like Pfle, Melville, Magical Daisy, and Akane were the ones doing all the fighting, while close-combat fighters undertook more risk and had the choice battles stolen from them. This was no good.

First, Fal tweaked the geography. More areas with obstructed lines of sight, like underground caverns, libraries, and towns, would make long-range attacks more difficult, and in addition, Fal also changed the monsters’ positions.

Once players acquired the monster encyclopedia after the middle section, the red skeleton monsters that reflected long-range attacks would appear throughout the game.

Mixing in monsters capable of reflecting projectiles prevented long-range fighters from launching attacks indiscriminately.

Additionally, Fal went over every magical ability that seemed like it might pose problems. Wherever possible, Fal wanted to avoid forcibly locking down magic abilities like with Detec Bell. Finding more clever work-arounds to deal with things was the best course of action.

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“Master…there’s another problem, pon…”

“*Again?* What is it this time?”

“When I turned up the imagination settings, it made Shadow Gale able to modify Magicaloid, pon.”

“What.”

“She became the giant magical-girl robot Ultimate-Powered

Magicaloid 555, capable of wielding 55,555,555,555,555,555 futuristic gadgets at will. She not only finishes the game, she defeats the master, pon."

"Seriously?"

"It kinda feels like…Fal put together two people you shouldn't ever allow together, pon."

"Wait, by Magicaloid, do you mean Magicaloid 44? *Why* are you putting her in there?"

"Why? She's connected to Cranberry, isn't she, pon?"

"Ah, right. I should've realized when you put Cranberry herself in the simulation. Listen, she's *deceased*. Sticking her in there in order to test behavioral patterns is one thing, but you don't have to have her participate in there."

"Ohhh, right, pon."

"Your thinking is too rigid; you need to be more flexible. I'll adjust your learning functionality settings accordingly."

"But then Fal would feel bad for Shadow Gale, pon. She'll never get another chance to meet her destiny ever again."

"We don't need any of that kind of poetic stuff, okay? What you *need* to do is remove anyone not related to the children from the simulator data. Just narrow it down to only those we're planning to have participate."

"So then Fal will change out the data…"

"Yeah, transfer it to me. I can just reuse part of it for the enemy data. She'd be happy to be useful, right?"

"But then Shadow Gale would wind up fighting against the one meant for her."

"I told you to drop the sentimentality! You're an AI, so do your job!"

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"Master, the game broke, pon."

"Huh? Is it even possible to break the game from inside?"

"Pfle kept buying up travel passes, causing an overflow in the number values, pon."

"That rich bitch, pulling nasty tricks… All right, let's put a cap on the total number of any items in circulation. Like hell I'll let her keep getting away with whatever she wants."

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“Master, no matter how Fal adjusts the Great Dragon’s settings, it’s too strong. Multiple players always drop out at that stage, pon. It’s got nothing to do with hints or items or things like that, pon. We just never anticipated a situation where they would be fighting against an enemy with so much firepower in such a small space, pon. The den of the Great Dragon was originally planned to be bigger, after all, pon.”

“Guess we have no choice… We’ll reduce its range of attack. Confine the breath attack even further.”

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“Master, for some reason, there’s no monsters in the library, pon.”

“Huh? No way… Eugh, you’re right. I forgot to create them! Agh, I’ve had enough of this!”

“Fal’s the one who’s had enough of this…”

“Hmm? Did you say something?”

“No, nothing… So what do we do about this, pon?”

“What a huge pain in the ass… I don’t wanna bother coming up with new monsters now, so… Oh, I know. We just decided to reuse the data from other magical girls, right? Let’s use that here.”

“Okay, okay… *Agh*, how long is this going to go on, pon…?”

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“Master…”

“Hey, Fal, are you okay?”

“When you break through the ceiling of the subterranean cavern area, you come out in the Evil King’s castle, pon…”

“Huh?! Why were those two areas connected?! Ugh! Whatever! Who cares!”

“You can’t say that… When the magical girls get in a big fight underground, it takes them straight to the last stage…”

“Well, that’s no good. Should we just move the Evil King’s castle elsewhere? But maybe moving the subterranean area would be less of a hassle."

"Move it? Where to…?"

"Wherever's fine, okay? *Wherever.* Just as long as it's not connected to the Evil King's castle… Hey, couldn't you just connect it with the previous stage?"

"Okay, then…"

"Uhhh… Fal, you're looking pretty rough there, so how about you switch over to simple tasks. Just tweak the mini-games."

"Roger, pon…"

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The magical girls' obstinance had turned a simple mini-game—the rock-paper-scissors event—into absolute hellish pandemonium.

Rionetta detached her arms, transformed them, then put them back on again. Pechka swallowed a yelp. Now Rionetta's hand was paper—hadn't it just been rock?

"Heh-heh, this transformation-style rock-paper-scissors technique may only be performed by a doll," Rionetta said. "Were you capable of seeing through it?"

"Uh, there's no transforming anything, pon," Fal told her. "In rock-paper-scissors, the rules say the hand you play first counts. You're not allowed to change it after, pon."

"If there was such a rule, one would expect it to be stated earlier."

"That's just the basic rules of rock-paper-scissors, pon. Rionetta, you broke the rules, so you're out."

Clantail played rock…or so it seemed, but then her lower body transformed into that of a great ape, and even though her main magical-girl body still held out rock, the ape fist was playing scissors. Which was supposed to be her real hand?

"You can't do this stuff, okay, pon?! Play a *normal* rock-paper-scissors game! You can only use one hand!"

"You never said we couldn't," Clantail pointed out.

"It doesn't matter, you still can't do it, pon! Okay, Clantail, you also broke the rules, so you're out!"

Lazuline crushed a gem in her fist and sprinkled the shards. By rapidly teleporting around over and over, she made it as if there were multiple Lazulines—and each and every one played a different move.

“Nope, not allowed! Lazuline, out for rule breaking!”

“Falzey, you’re bein’ too strict!” Lazuline argued.

“Fal isn’t being too strict, pon! You guys are just all over the place, pon!”

Genopsyko Yumenoshima insisted that all her papers would win—she had the ultimate paper that couldn’t be cut, torn, or broken by anyone.

“The nature of the individual’s magic doesn’t count when playing rock-paper-scissors,” said Fal.

“No way! Then there’s no point in having this super suit!” Genopsyko wailed.

“That’s for the best, okay? It’s not like Fal is telling you to play rock-paper-scissors naked, pon.”

@Meow-Meow summoned three stone statues from her talismans. They were in the shapes of human hands—one clenched, one open, and one with just the index and middle fingers stuck out. Didn’t that mean the same thing as playing all hands at once?

“@Meow-Meow is out!”

By making herself gigantic, Cherna Mouse raised her arm so high that her opponent couldn’t see her hand no matter how they craned their neck. By doing this, even if she changed her hand afterward to make the move she wanted, she made it so nobody could complain.

“Cherna Mouse, out!”

By focusing intently on the thought that she was going to play scissors, Nokko controlled the moves her opponents would play. The problem was that she wished for it so strongly, she also wound up playing scissors herself, and her games ended in nothing but ties.

“Okay, by Fal’s authority as contest holder, Fal is calling that a draw, pon.”

And Masked Wonder controlled the weight of each finger on her opponents to move their hands to her will—

“Out!”

Melville changed the appearance of her hands to alter—

“Out!”

Akane didn’t even care and swung down her katana—

“Of course that’s out! Why does everyone use their magic so casually, pon?! Give us more of a, like, psychological battle, a match of the minds, a clash of ideas or something like that, pon!”

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“Uwaaaaaaaaaaaaagh!”

“Whoa, Fal! What’s wrong?!”

“The magical girls! The magical girls all just do what they want! The mini-game isn’t a mini-game anymore! Master! Is this simulator working properly, pon?!”

“Come on, I made that simulator, you know? So of course I’ve paid *every* attention to making it precisely accurate, making sure there’s not even the slightest difference between the simulation and real life.”

“So then you should just use the simulation, pon!”

“No, there wouldn’t be any point in *that*.”

“If it perfectly recreates what would happen in reality, then if you just make the judgments in the simulator, there’s no need to bother having a game, pon! Forget about this stupid game, pon!”

“Hey, Fal! Calm down!”

“How can Fal calm down, pon?! With all these magical girls running amok… Fal can’t take this anymore, pon… Every day, Fal reads blogs from people who’ve been working at exploitative nightmare jobs to console himself with the thought that there’s people worse off in this world, pon…”

“Why are you so stressed out? You can’t even get a stomachache or a mental breakdown.”

“Ugh, master won’t acknowledge Fal’s individual rights… Fal is less than a corporate slave, pon… Every day is just being at the mercy of willful magical girls…”

“You’re kind of actually starting to lose it. Maybe making you capable of flexible thought was a bad idea.”

“Someone, help… The magical girls… The magical girls are attacking…”

“You’re totally broken.”

“Fal will spill all the beans, pon! And tell the players, *‘One of you is the Evil King, so just beat them up, pon!’* And with the Evil King gone, then this stupid game—”

“Hey, go take a break… This is bad. Seems like having the mascot know stuff about the Evil King is scary inconvenient. Better erase its memory."

"Urk…magical girls…magical girls…pon…"

"Eh, whatever. We'll just throw random stuff together for the events. And hey, it's bumped their imagination settings way too high. This is what gives you such weird results. Those girls can hardly manage anything to begin with, so we can lower the settings even further. Having too many people gives them weird ideas, so we decrease the max party size. And then for the rock-paper-scissors and the race… How about we try making them compete over their number of magical candies? That'll cause them to fight among themselves. And those red skeletons—why'd Fal stick these trash mobs in at the middle? You can have them at the beginning, come on. Also… Um, wow, there's lots of stuff to do. We'll just tweak this here, hide that there… As for Fal…"

"Pon…pon…"

"Not happening, huh? Oh well, gotta do it myself… Myself? For real? I'm doing all this? When there's less than a week until game launch? When I already have my hands full, and feel tired despite being a magical girl? When I'm here thinking just how happy it would make me if I could stop thinking and just dive into bed? When I've started unconsciously talking to myself, saying negative stuff like *I'll kill you* and *Die*?"

"Pon pon pon pon pon…"

"…I'll just have an energy drink and think about it…"

Pechka Ponders Autumn Delights

This story takes place right in the middle of *Magical Girl Raising Project restart*.

Debut

Magical Girl Raising Project School Calendar 2016
(Tsukuru no Mori) bonus short story collection
Magical Girl Raising Project: Circle of Life

Pechka Ponders Autumn Delights

◇ **Pechka**

Say that when you're selecting a party in a console RPG, one of your options is a character who can't do anything. Normally, no player would choose them, although they might if the character had some bonus attribute outside of combat—like being good at recovery magic even though they couldn't fight, or being able to undo traps or open locks or treasure chests—or they could be promoted to a powerful job class once they hit a certain level. But if the character truly couldn't do anything, nobody would use them.

Right now, Pechka was that character. She watched off to the side during battles. She followed along quietly when exploring. She didn't actually *do* anything. She contributed nothing to the party. In addition, because the magical candies earned through combat were split equally among the four of them, Pechka's useless presence decreased the others' rewards. Not only was she of no benefit to anyone, she was actively dragging them down. Truly the worst party member.

For starters, she wasn't playing this game because she wanted to. She'd essentially been dragged into *Magical Girl Raising Project*. Because of that, she wanted to snap back at everyone like, *"It's not my fault if I'm not useful,"* but with Rionetta making stinging remarks, Nonako insensitively bringing up how useless Pechka was, and Clantail looking over at her like she wanted to say something, Pechka wanted to disappear on the spot. At this rate, she was bound to develop an ulcer. The other three magical girls took the game seriously because of the lavish ten-billion-yen completion prize, and that motivation only made Pechka feel even more out of place.

She had never been useful—not at the start and definitely not now. Clantail and Rionetta were quietly moping over how another party had driven them off the hunting grounds. Nonako Miyokata was keeping cheery conversation going all on her own, but there was a strong sense that they were spinning their wheels. The air around the fire was heavy.

If Pechka could say one thoughtful thing or lighten the mood enough to blow away this oppressive air, then no one could claim she was useless. But despite telling herself to say something—*anything*—she couldn't manage a single word. Rionetta suddenly looked up, a severe expression on her face. She was staring at Nonako. Judging by her expression, she clearly didn't think well of her. *Uh-oh*, Pechka thought; she expected Rionetta to say something like, *"Goodness, you really are a motormouth,"* or *"Even a housefly would show better restraint."* Those two were always clashing over every little thing.

"By the way…," Pechka said without thinking. And she was fretting about it more than anyone else could be. She'd been thinking she had to do something before Rionetta attacked Nonako, but she didn't quite have any specific ideas of what to talk about.

Rionetta, Nonako, and Clantail were all looking at her. She had to say something. But when she tried to talk, she panicked, and when she panicked, words got lodged in her throat. She didn't have the time to think of something helpful to say.

"By the way…um…there's no seasons in this game…right?" Pechka said, finally.

Rionetta, Nonako, and Clantail stared at her dubiously.

Pechka panicked. Babbling on about the seasons in order to make small talk was too clichéd. But she couldn't take it back now. She had to bring this to some kind of point. "Outside the game, it's fall, but…here…um…it's all dreary."

When it was compared with the first area, the wasteland, maybe you could say the fact that there was grass growing here made it better, but there was scant difference between the barrenness there and the barrenness of this second area, the grasslands. There was no harvest or red leaves. Only grass blowing in the wind.

"And when you think of autumn…it's, like, a harvest season…" Pechka didn't even know herself what she was trying to say anymore, but the panic telling her that she just had to say something wrung the words out for her.

Rionetta looked away as if she'd lost interest, Clantail closed her eyes, and Nonako's gaze turned to the campfire.

“*…Dobin mushi,*” Rionetta muttered, talking about a traditional broth with steamed prawn, chicken, and mushrooms and served in a dobin teapot.

Nonako followed up with “Marrons glacés…,” a kind of candied chestnut dish.

“*Iridori…,*” Clantail muttered with her eyes still closed, lowering her head, picturing chicken and vegetables simmering in mixed sauces.

The tension from moments before was all gone. Instead, a sort of ennui or gloom or something enshrouded the three girls, who immediately fell into a somber silence. What was going on here? Pechka examined the trio, but they remained with their mouths closed, seemingly lost in thought.

◇ Rionetta

Back when Rionetta was known as Rio Kujou, she would go to her father’s favorite restaurant every autumn to stuff her face with various matsutake mushroom dishes. Even now, she could remember the many lavish, exquisite foods that had lined the sparkling countertops: meat skewers; steaming *dobin mushi* in earthenware teapots; clear mushroom broth; *ochazuke*, steamed rice steeped in green tea; and egg drop soup.

Of all these, the thing her parents had enjoyed the most was the *dobin mushi.*

The light-colored broth had smelled faintly of freshly squeezed *kabosu* citrus; the thick-cut matsutake mushrooms nicely complemented the soft texture of the conger eel.

To be honest, she didn’t really think she’d properly understood what made matsutake mushrooms so good. Feeding a child matsutake was basically for the self-satisfaction of the parents. It was just a barometer for having achieved a level of success where they were able to enjoy that self-satisfaction.

At the time, Rio hadn’t thought about things so cynically—rather, she’d believed the food had to be good because her mother and father were saying that it was good, and she’d lived her life without doubting anything at all: not her parents, the chefs, the matsutake mushrooms, the eel, the *kabosu*, or the world.

Her father had been around back then. And her mother. The

Kujou family had been full of smiles and wealth. Rio had lots of friends, too. When she got in trouble, those “friends” wouldn’t be any help at all, but Rio had never even considered the time would come when she’d be in trouble. Life had been fun, with only good people around her. Suffering and struggle had only ever happened in stories, or on the other side of the TV, to those pitiable people you had to offer charity to.

Now, she no longer went to that restaurant, or anything of the sort. Her father was gone, and her mother was gone. Rionetta had become one of those pitiable people, but there was no kind benefactor who would offer her charity. There was no point in a magical girl spending wads of money to savor haute cuisine when she didn’t need to eat or drink. It was enough for her to choke down her flavorless rations.

Inside her doll, Rionetta breathed a sigh that no one else could hear.

◇ Nonako Miyokata

Nonako had no difficulty in chatting with other people to show them a good time—in fact, she enjoyed doing so. After she’d moved to Japan when her father’s job was transferred there, it had taken her two years to become conversational in Japanese, and she’d made plenty of friends at her middle school. It was around that time that Anna had become a magical girl. Being a pragmatist, whenever she had a spare moment, she started thinking about how she could take advantage of her magic to make it useful in her own life. Since she’d become a magical girl, she wanted to get some benefit from it.

In her classes, during gym time, during breaks, while catching basketballs or while throwing them, while eating her lunch, she pondered how she could make use of her magic to make friends with animals—while also being careful about it, since if she did anything too big, the Magical Kingdom might zero in on her. Making changes and revisions along the way, she put together a plan.

In the corner of the schoolyard, there was a chestnut tree. The rule was that it was okay to pick up any chestnuts that fell, but there were a lot of kids after them. Covered in sharp spines, the nuts were packed full of sweet flesh.

Whether roasted or steamed, or in Mont Blanc or in Maman's specialty, marrons glacés, everyone at school knew that chestnuts tasted amazing no matter how you cooked them.

Nonako Miyokata's human form, Anna Sarizae, was one of the people after those chestnuts. Chestnuts were good. The chestnuts from *that* tree were particularly good. She very much wanted to get them for herself and eat them all up. Anna was greedy. But she didn't just have a lot of rivals—the school had even set up a security camera, since every year some students would be reckless. Even if she could get the chestnuts somehow with her magical-girl powers, getting caught on camera would spell trouble.

So Anna made a plan. First she'd make friends with a crow. And then she'd order the crow to knock down the chestnuts. Anna would stay in her regular form, and then right before the bell signaling the end of lunch rang, when nobody was around, she'd nonchalantly wait underneath the tree and pick up the chestnuts the crow had knocked down and take them for herself. No one would ever suspect Nonako and the crow were in cahoots. It should have been a perfect plan.

The next day, she put her plan into action. She had a crow peck at the chestnuts until they fell to the ground.

The moment she thought, *Yes! I did it!* a chestnut burr hit her right in the face where she was waiting underneath the tree, and her shriek rang out in the empty schoolyard.

◇ Clantail

On the long weekends in the autumn, it was customary for the Ono family to spend a few days with Nene's father's parents.

Her grandparents' house was deep in the mountains, very remote compared with where Nene lived. It gave her a lot of opportunities to see wild animals like tanukis and monkeys. Nene loved animals, so it was perfect for her. She liked animals more than people. You could tell what animals were thinking, what they wanted.

Her grandparents kept chickens. Those domestic chickens were more accustomed to people than wild animals were. Her grandparents didn't name the chickens, treating them as a group and not as individual creatures, but even if she didn't do it consciously, Nene remembered each one’s individual quirks and gave them all names. She fed them, and when she let them out into the yard for exercise, she played with them and ran around with them.

Her parents worried because she didn’t have friends, but Nene was fine having animals for companions.

That year was different from the usual. On the second day of her stay, just like the day before, she fed the chickens, but when she let them out of the coop to play, there was one short. Yoshio, Michiko, Jirou, Jouichi, and Kinuyo were all there, but Sachi wasn’t. No matter where Nene looked, she couldn’t find her. Nene checked the feed bin and behind the coop, but Sachi wasn’t there. Had she run away? Had she been attacked by a cat or a dog? Around here, she could’ve been attacked by a tanuki or a monkey, or maybe even a bear.

The more Nene thought about it, the more she kept imagining awful things. Where was Sachi? What had happened to her? Thinking that she had to hurry and report to an adult, Nene ran for her grandmother to find her in the kitchen, sharpening a knife. Nene kept herself from stumbling over her words as she blurted everything out rapidly.

Nene’s grandmother looked at her with a baffled expression and said, “Hmm? You didn’t know, hon? The *iridori* you had yesterday, the stuff you were sayin’ was so good—that was the chicken I had your grampa fetch for me.”

Nene had indeed eaten that braised chicken dish for dinner last night. The crisp texture of the lotus root, the soft and flaky taro, the shiitake mushrooms lush with lots of broth, and the main ingredient, the chicken—yes, the chicken. The centerpiece of that dish.

Once she realized what her grandmother meant, the following three days became a total blur.

Ever since then, whenever she stayed over at her grandparents’ place, she never touched the *iridori*.

◇ Pechka

She’d finished with the game for the day and was back in the real world, but she still hadn’t figured out what had been up with that awkward silence earlier. Clantail, Rionetta, and Nonako had all been in a funk. They didn't seem irritated about anything that had happened in the game, but more like something else, something kind of distant, was on their minds.

Things had been plenty depressing at that moment, just with the stuff in the game. Nonako had been making a fuss about how their party had gotten driven out of the hunting grounds while other groups forged on ahead, Rionetta had been touchy, and Clantail had been somber. But they'd been thinking of something other than their current situation—all three of them, startlingly enough.

Pechka didn't like this game. She wanted to avoid thinking about it, if possible. She wasn't cut out for fighting, and even if the damage in the game wasn't real, she didn't like to get hurt. But still, she was scared to drop out without saying anything. She'd probably get yelled at and made fun of; maybe she'd even get slapped or kicked. She'd been down in the dumps as she continued the game against her will, but once she was back in the real world, she came up with one good idea. Or it was less that she came up with it, and more that she'd gotten a hint.

And that hint had come from Ninomiya. He'd complimented the meal Pechka had made with her magic, an ability she'd only ever thought of as a little bonus. Pechka's magic had given her an opportunity to get alone with Ninomiya and talk with him. Therefore, her cooking had been useful.

I could even make use of this in the game, she thought.

According to Fal, the game had a hidden hunger parameter. That was why they'd been eating those dry, bland rations that didn't taste good at all, just to fill their stomachs. But what if those rations actually tasted good? They'd feel less like farm animals at mealtime and more like humans enjoying a proper meal.

She thought back on the moment they'd had the last time they'd eaten in the game.

Rionetta, Clantail, and Nonako had reacted when Pechka had brought up autumn, the harvest season. The resulting doom and gloom hadn't been caused by the game being boring or not going well or anything like that. Harvest meant food. Maybe they had been lamenting, "*Why do we have to eat such gross rations during the harvest season, when there's so much delicious food?*"

Pechka could change that. And not only would the food be good

—they wouldn't have to pay for rations, meaning they could save more magical candy. She could finally contribute to the party. She would no longer be a drag whose presence served no purpose, but a true member who would support the party with food.

She still wasn't into playing the game, but contributing this much was better than nothing.

And since it was autumn, she wanted to make something autumnal. Matsutake *dobin mushi*, marrons glacés, *iridori*—each of the three magical girls wanted a different food. How could she serve them best? The three dishes seemed too unrelated to serve together.

Since this was her first time making food for magical girls, she didn't reach any conclusions, even after she spent the whole night mulling it over. So the next day, she tried indirectly asking Ninomiya when he joined her in the park for lunch.

"Huh?" he said. "Autumn foods? Hmmm. I guess I'd say rice balls."

"Rice balls…?"

"The rice balls I had during my autumn field trip in elementary school were super tasty."

Rice balls, of all things. She thought that rather than mentioning a specifically autumnal food, bringing up a memory that had left a strong impression on him—one of rice balls—was very like Ninomiya. But perhaps she was biased.

The more she thought about it, however, the more appropriate rice balls seemed. There weren't a lot of foods you could easily eat without any plates, bowls, forks, knives, chopsticks—any utensils at all. And besides, you could fill rice balls with fall foods as a way to fully enjoy the harvest season.

Okay, then rice balls it is.

Chika went to bed, deeply grateful to Ninomiya. The problem now was: What sort of rice balls should she make? And if she was going to test the fillings, she couldn't use Ninomiya as her guinea pig. So who out there could she rope into taste testing? She got the feeling that it could be only one person.

◇ Tomoki

When he got home, there were rice balls lined up on the table. The well-shaped white triangles were prettily wrapped in seaweed with a dark purplish sheen, and the rice was so perfectly cooked that you could pick out each and every grain. The wafting smell of fresh-steamed rice was mouthwatering.

Standing beside the table was his older sister. She was wearing an apron; maybe that meant she'd made the rice balls? Tomoki had occasionally seen her cooking, but he didn't think he'd ever seen her making rice balls. She didn't usually make anything that simple—she had the tendency to go overboard and try really fancy and involved dishes.

"What's this about?" Tomoki asked her.

"Can you try some of these for me?"

"Huh? You sure?"

Elementary schoolers are always hungry. Their mom might get mad if Tomoki ate something filling at this hour, but if he were to go play after this to burn off some calories, then he should still be able to enjoy dinner. He was feeling optimistic, so he picked up one of the light-brown rice balls. Was there something mixed in with the rice?

When he took a bite, something crunched inside his mouth. "What's this…? Lotus root? Lotus root in a rice ball?"

"That's *iridori*."

True, the sweet soy sauce–based flavor was like that of *iridori*. It was present in each ingredient—the chicken, lotus root, carrots, taro—as well as the rice. After Tomoki finished the rice ball, he tilted his head. It wasn't bad, but whether the filling suited a rice ball was…well, the word *iffy* came to mind.

"Try the others, too," Chika suggested.

The rice ball she pushed at him was in a bowl. It wasn't just juicy—it was soaked in broth, and the rice was falling apart. The unfamiliar aroma tickled his nose pleasantly.

"That's a matsutake *dobin mushi* rice ball," she explained.

Tomoki picked up the chopsticks from the chopstick rest and stirred the contents of the bowl. He knew matsutake mushrooms were fancy, and he had no idea how his sister had gotten ahold of some, but in any case, the dish was delicious, with a complex flavor that permeated his tongue—but this wasn't a rice ball.

"Sis, this is good, but it's not a rice ball. It's *ochazuke*."

"I guess you're right. How about this one?"

The rice ball she held out to him was made of very normal white rice. *Maybe this one's normal,* Tomoki thought as he bit into it, then scowled. It smelled sweet. It was soaked in sugar, and…were those chestnuts? The taste and texture of chestnuts were all through the rice, spreading inside his mouth.

"What…is this…?" he asked.

"Ummm… That's the marrons glacés."

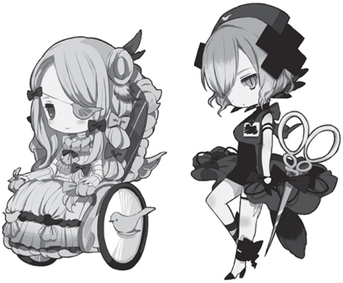
Tomoki ran to the garbage bin beside the fridge and spat out the food, then gargled a few times to rinse the taste from his mouth. It seemed like his sister was protesting, but it went in one ear and out the other.

After that, he wasted an hour arguing with her, plus another thirty minutes convincing her to please just make normal rice balls. Having been made to eat something so weird, he mustered up all the vocabulary an elementary schooler could possess in an attempt to convince her, utterly exhausting himself as a result, and he headed off to bed before it was even nine o'clock. But his sister remained in the kitchen, and it looked like she was working. *Just where does she get that enthusiasm?* Tomoki wondered as he was drawn into the world of dreams.

The marrons glacés rice ball showed up again in his dreams. *This is too much,* he thought.

Magical Girls on Christmas Eve

This story takes place before the events of *Magical Girl Raising Project limited.*



Debut

Monthly Magical Girl Raising Project on *This Manga is Amazing! WEB*

Magical Girls on Christmas Eve

◇ Mamori Totoyama

Mamori had heard there were such things out there as “fun, joyful Christmas parties.” She’d never experienced one for herself. No matter how the general populace took them for granted, she couldn’t say for sure that they existed if she’d never seen such a party firsthand.

Large-scale parties, with prominent people from the area and celebrities sprinkled here and there among the invitees, and a fancy dinner brought personally by the owner-chefs of famous restaurants, were for the enjoyment of partygoers of corresponding status, and a mere attendant was not permitted to enjoy such things. Mamori would stand behind her mistress and pass the time with such tasks as bowing and smiling politely. Then the party would be over and the next day would arrive.

Ever since Mamori had been small, this was what parties had been. But the media really shoved these “fun, joyful Christmas parties” down your throat. Although the letdown of reality left her despondent, Mamori kept smiling on the outside, at least, as she trailed behind Kanoe. This was how Christmas went for Mamori Totoyama, and that would never change, even now that she was a magical girl—or so she had thought.

“Though it truly brings me deep regret, I must hold a party at the department. So I am forced to remain apart from you for the whole day, on Christmas. It seems the hostess cannot be slipping out of her own event.” Bouncing on her bottom on a balance ball, saucer in her right hand and cup in her left, Kanoe seemed to be joking, but her expression was—for Kanoe—apologetic.

Sitting on the bed, Mamori looked down on Kanoe to examine her expression, and to keep Kanoe from noticing that, she reached out to her own cup, bringing it to her lips to hide half her face. “I see, a party at the department…huh? Uh-huh.”

“What is it, Mamori? You’re making odd noises.”

“Just thinking, for all your bragging about how important you are now, it’s not as if you’re running a dictatorship,” Mamori replied with mild sarcasm.

But still, she was surprised to have gained free time during Christmas for the first time she could remember. The situation made sense to her, though. Kanoe Hitokouji—the magical girl Pfle—had used her natural deviousness, calculation, bluffing, connections, financial means, and so on and so forth to rise within the public offices of the Magical Kingdom and brag about it. As a rule, she did not involve Mamori—Shadow Gale—in that business, so it made sense that Shadow Gale would not accompany her to this party. In other words, this was different from her usual Christmases.

“So about your plans…,” Kanoe began.

“You need not be concerned,” Mamori replied. “I have my own plans.”

“Oh, do you?”

Mamori had no one else besides Kanoe. If she were to realize that Mamori was privately screaming with joy, who knew what sort of sabotage she’d get up to? Mamori inserted an appropriate level of sullenness to hide the fact that she actually did want to be away from Kanoe, taking meticulous caution not to blow her cover. She wanted Kanoe to think that she obviously had no plans but was putting on a front and making like she did.

Yes, Mamori was glad. She was dancing for joy that Kanoe wouldn’t be around. Well, when it came to dancing, all she’d ever done was that “create your own dance” in gym class, but that counted. Maybe she would get to experience that “fun, joyful Christmas party” she’d thought would never happen to her.

Kanoe continued going on about something or other as she returned to her room, and Mamori at last got to revel in her joy, while at the same time, she realized she had to get serious about this. A “fun, joyful Christmas party” was not a guarantee. It would come only from the effort Mamori put in now.

For the following two days, Mamori waited to see how things would go. Kanoe was in frequent contact with various people. She was probably busy with that department party. It seemed she had many things to do, and that distracted her from Mamori. If Mamori wanted to outmaneuver this sharp and wily villain, then it was now or never. Mamori got started on her plan.

First, she had to decide on the goals and structure of the party. What kind of event would she make it? Who would attend?

The really cool thing to do on Christmas was to go on a date with your significant other, a trend that had been around since before Mamori was born. But Mamori didn't have that kind of someone in her life, and she didn't have the guts to get one now, in the two weeks before Christmas.

Celebrating Christmas Eve with her family was also out of the question. Her parents put the master's household first, and they were occupied with regular business. If they learned that Mamori wasn't going to be with Kanoe, they would definitely tell her, *"If you're free, then come help us."* So she would make it seem as if she were with Kanoe and not mention that they would be apart.

That meant she would have a fun time with some friends. Mamori could think of a number of rich girls she was friends with at school who would come if she invited them to a party, but she'd never hung out with them without Kanoe. Mamori's relationships at school all fundamentally went through Kanoe. If she invited those girls, she could easily anticipate that information would reach Kanoe.

Did she not have any legitimate friends, people she wouldn't worry would report to Kanoe? Any Selinuntius-like characters who'd both offer themselves up as a hostage for her and attend a party with her? She did not; Mamori had only one Campanella, only one true friend. Turning on her magical phone, she selected Clantail and sent her a message. It was an invitation to her party. She also made sure to ask her to keep it a secret from Pfle.

While waiting for her response, Mamori hung her head. *Isn't this rather short for a list of friends?* she wondered. But then she lifted her head: *Well, then I should just make some now.* Imagining a future with lots of friends, she waited thirty minutes, then got a response. Her offer had been accepted, albeit with the proviso, as long as the party doesn't go too late. You could basically call this an easy yes. And Clantail didn't even question the part about keeping things secret from Pfle; she just answered sure thing. Mamori hugged her magical phone to her chest a moment, savoring her swelling joy. This was what friendship was all about.

But this was just the start. Just Mamori and Clantail having a celebration together didn't make a party. Only when you had a certain number of people could you call it a party.

Shadow Gale had no magical-girl acquaintances she could invite. This was all because of Pfle. But despite her burning with anger toward Kanoe/Pfle for trying to get in her way at every opportunity, now was not the time to be venting about that. Mamori felt bad about being entirely reliant on Clantail, but she was the only person Mamori could count on. Mamori expressed her joy about Clantail's willing participation, making use of her full vocabulary to ensure it would be communicated through her text message, also adding, Please invite your friends, too. She even put, The more the merrier, in fact. It'd be a problem if there were too few. She worried that might be a bit much and might put Clantail off, but in the end, she sent it like that. It was just a fact that she'd be in trouble if there weren't enough people.

The reply came in five minutes. The brief text message read, Understood, exuding Clantail's earnest personality. She acted completely different from a certain someone who would use far too many words in an attempt to confuse people. Clantail was generally taciturn, with few patterns to her facial expressions, so she did come off as unsociable at a glance, but various parts of her, such as her tail and hooves, would indicate her feelings with surprising garrulity. That was interesting to watch all on its own. Even if Clantail was curt, she wasn't boring to be around. Being the sort of person she was, she'd have a lot of magical-girl friends, unlike Shadow Gale. And friends or acquaintances of Clantail could never be bad people. Aside from Pfle.

An unsnobbish party full of people to be at ease with sounded nice, but there was no one Shadow Gale could be at ease with, so oh well. The point of this party was to get to know people she could be friendly with. If she wasn't going to put in the effort now to make friends other than through Pfle, then when would she?

In the two weeks before Christmas, Shadow Gale kept careful watch over Pfle's activities, taking great care that Pfle did not pick up on what was going on in Shadow Gale's head as she cautiously proceeded with arrangements for the party. Though it seemed the enemy was focused on the other party, Shadow Gale nevertheless knew well enough to scream and cry about it that you could never let your guard down with Pfle. Shadow Gale could assume that if she did something to draw attention to herself, she would be questioned. Besides, even if Kanoe herself didn't notice, there would be spy types lurking in unexpected places to report to Kanoe anything that came up. So Mamori restrained her jitters and made slow and gradual progress in her preparations on her own. She procured items like Christmas wreaths, tinsel, electric lights, a charming tree, party crackers, a Santa Claus and stars, and board games individually through different routes, and she reserved a cake. Though the bakery she ordered from wasn't exactly famous, it had a decent rating on a review site. She chose a cake that was big, so it'd be fine even if lots of people came, and made sure it was visually appealing, with an edible Santa decoration.

And since she couldn't hold this party at the Hitokouji estate, she rented a room for the venue. But then Clantail sent her a message saying, It seems like there will be a lot more people, is that okay, though? Without letting anyone see how she was chuckling smugly to herself, Shadow Gale replied, That's no problem and pumped her right fist in a little victory pose.

Having more people wasn't a bad thing. Clantail's response read, Thank you, followed by They're going to be bringing food and drinks. That was also something to be very thankful for. Shadow Gale had intended to somehow manage a few expenses with her savings, but if she could restrain expenditures there, that would make it possible to invest those funds elsewhere.

She wouldn't choose anyplace too cramped, like a rental room or a space in a community center. If she held the party in the school gym, it was too likely that Kanoe would notice, and the same went for a meeting room at the library. It seemed every possible venue had flaws of one sort or another, but then Mamori's brain, which normally only ever operated dimly, came up with an idea that seemed quite brilliant.

There was that underground shelter that had been made on Pfle's order. The anti-magical-girl system she'd ordered from the Magical Kingdom had been modified with Shadow Gale's magic, which had made it into an emergency bomb shelter removed from this dimension and transported into another world. Shadow Gale had added further modifications daily, continually improving it to add resistance to every possible intruder, magic, and destructive weapon.

Currently, the only way into it was through the Hitokouji estate. But the space was in another dimension, so if Shadow Gale modified it, she could make another entrance someplace very far away. So she would invest her extra funds into the creation of a second entrance and invite the guests in through there, and then, after the party was over, she would use her magically modified automatic cleaning device to erase all traces of the event, dismantle the second entrance, and destroy the evidence, then go welcome Pfle back from her department party event with a nonchalant look on her face.

It's perfect… This will work!

Mamori Totoyama clapped her hands, certain of the party's success and her clear victory.

◇ Shadow Gale

Mamori Totoyama had never hosted a party before.

She'd attended parties held by others many times. Sometimes the organizer was an adult, sometimes a kid, an organization, or a commercial group—but whether the event had been big or small, no particular problems had ever cropped up, and such parties had moved quietly along before the time came for everyone to go. Mamori had assumed that was just how it went.

Now that she was the hostess, she realized for the first time that you couldn't take any of that for granted. Every party was made a success by the unrelenting efforts of the organizer and the people they invited.

Waiting for someone underneath a cloudy sky that could drop snow any minute, in the middle of the wilderness, with cold winds raging, was not an ordinary thing to do. You had to be a magical girl, with resistance to icy temperatures, or you were bound to freeze to death, even with a full set of cold-weather gear.

Shadow Gale's initial plan had been to put the entrance to the shelter on a mountain path nobody used at night. Her only priority was keeping it unnoticed, waving her guests in under utter secrecy. But she was forced to revise this plan with the very first guest. This was because that magical girl, who'd arrived thirty minutes before the time the venue was scheduled to open, arrived riding a one-woman lawn-mowing machine that looked like a tractor. Belatedly, Shadow Gale realized that she hadn't anticipated anyone would come riding a vehicle. But then she remembered that on the way, she'd passed through a parking lot for hikers at the base of the mountain trail.

With the aggressive-looking lawn mower taking the lead and its even more aggressive rider yelling at her, Shadow Gale headed down the poorly maintained trail to the parking lot. Figuring there would be others coming by vehicle, she made a sign saying CARS THIS WAY, decorating it with some extra electric lights so that it would stand out. As she was doing that, elaborately dressed people who looked like magical girls came one after another, and each time, Shadow Gale explained, "Go a little farther, and the entrance is up there." But people complained that it was hard to tell where it was, and Shadow Gale was forced to bow her head a few times, and so, figuring she needed a sign for this as well, she made a second one, making it say, "The entrance is right up this way."

Though she used magic for her modifications, it took about thirty minutes to make two big signs that could be seen even from a distance. And since she couldn't use her magic on the parts that weren't mechanical, that actually took more time. And going up and down the trail took up even *more* time. *And* all the while she was working, guests kept coming. She didn't have the time to even greet them one by one. The big parking lot was filled with vehicles like lawn mowers and flying saucers and things she couldn't even recognize. This meant a lot of the guests were old enough to have driver's licenses, and Clantail had a lot of older friends, too. Shadow Gale's plan to "act like a big sister toward middle school–age magical girls" changed to "be educated on the nuances of the lives of adult magical girls," and once she was done setting up the signs, she headed up the mountain trail.

As expected, the entrance was packed with magical girls. This was inevitable, with such a big crowd arriving at the thing she'd built in a restricted space. Each time Shadow Gale heard someone complain, "The line's so long," or "Why is it so cramped?" she cringed. Finally she reached the entrance.

"Merry Christmas!"

"Ah, right. Merry Christmas," Shadow Gale replied.

A magical girl dressed like a scholar was blocking the entrance. A little bell was stuck on the end of the string that hung from her hat, and the tie at her neck was in Christmas colors. She'd probably worn it for the party.

"Right then, the party venue is just ahead," she told Shadow

Gale.

"Okay."

"Since this is a peaceful gathering, all types of weapons will be checked at the door. You're not carrying anything like that, right?"

Shadow Gale did have her scissors and her wrench, but those were tools for work, not for hurting people. "I'm not," she replied.

A reception process had been made without Shadow Gale even knowing about it. This magical girl must have volunteered to manage it and guide people in, since it was so crowded here. Magical girls were fundamentally about helping people, so many of them were kind. Privately feeling thankful, Shadow Gale finally got inside the venue, where she found it was even more crowded. Since it had never been a normal space to begin with, there were no problems with its size, but that meant that once a lot of people were inside, it got as packed as a can of sardines.

There was a magical girl calling out, "Anyone who's lost, come this way!" through a loudspeaker; a group of *Cutie Healer* cosplayers; a magical girl demonstrating how she could pull the tablecloth off a table without disturbing the dishes atop it; some indescribable person engaged in pleasant discussion. Gathering a particularly large crowd was the Christmas cake–making presentation. A magical girl in glasses and a cake-like costume was taking the lead in the decoration of a giant, five-layer Christmas cake. The Santa Claus on top was the size of a volleyball. The craftsmanship was beautiful, and it looked like it was still delicious, even being so huge. Her skills were fabulous enough to impress Shadow Gale, as a fellow creator—but what had happened to the store-bought cake Shadow Gale ordered?

It was dizzying. Not only were there lots and lots of magical girls, but they really ran the gamut. Were all of them really Clantail's acquaintances? Were none of the people who'd shown up during Shadow Gale's brief absence strangers?

"Here." A magical girl decked out in lace, a cape, garlic, and a garter belt offered Shadow Gale a glass.

She reflexively accepted it. "Ah, thanks." As she brought it to her mouth, a strong scent wafted up to her nostrils, and she pushed it away. "Is this alcohol?"

"It's a special alcohol that can even get magical girls drunk."

"Sorry, I'm a minor."

"Oh, come now, today's a special day."

"Uh, I still can't…"

As the two of them pushed the glass back and forth between them, droplets sloshed up from inside the glass to hit Shadow Gale's cheek. The fancily dressed magical girl apologized quite sincerely, touching the back of her hand to Shadow Gale's cheek to wipe off the droplets before responding to a call from elsewhere asking if there was any booze, rushing off with her tray full of glasses in one hand.

That woman was handing out alcohol, and the sort that would have an effect on magical girls, too. A lot of magical girls were emotionally unstable to begin with, and Shadow Gale didn't even want to think about what would happen if you added booze to that. There were enough people here that it was no longer a question of trusting them because they were Clantail's friends. With this many people, it wouldn't be a surprise if there were a dangerous person or two in the crowd.

Thinking all the more that she had to find Clantail, Shadow Gale started walking, but she was quickly called to a stop.

"You over there."

"Pardon?" A powerful aroma made Shadow Gale scrunch up her nose.

A magical girl with a blue necktie wrapped around her forehead was holding out a ramen bowl as she smacked a pot lid twice. "If you can't have booze, then how about this?"

"No, this isn't the time to be eating—"

"Though 'tis yet to reach supreme perfection, I've never once thought its flavor inferior."

The split curtains fluttered. The air rippled from the heat rising from the giant gas stove, and the green-haired magical girl beside it cutting onions wore an expression of utter resignation.

A food stall…!

It wasn't as if it were out of the question for a food stall to show up at a party venue. But hadn't it been a mistake to choose tonkotsu ramen with such an intense smell? If the hostess had permitted it, then maybe it wouldn't matter, but the hostess was right here and had no recollection of having given permission. But the person running this stall was too intimidating for Shadow Gale to tell her she was disallowing it on the authority of the hostess, and she really got the impression that she didn't want to get further mixed up with this person. Magical girls with ramen bowls were gathered all around, proclaiming how delicious the noodles were as they scarfed them down.

Well, as long as people are happy, Shadow Gale thought, mentally giving them permission to run their business. Dodging the bowl that was thrust at her, she resumed her search for Clantail.

The more she looked, the more she noticed how many people there were. A mouse mascot and a cat mascot were dangling from the ceiling, playing. Weren't they using the electric lights Shadow Gale had put up? And wasn't the cake that large magical girl standing on a table was gobbling down the Christmas cake Shadow Gale had gone to the trouble of purchasing? She'd wondered where it had gone, and apparently it was over there, getting eaten. Maybe that girl thought of it as just a bit of a snack. And that red-faced magical girl drinking champagne straight from the bottle as she laughed loudly—wasn't that thing around her neck the Christmas wreath Shadow Gale had set out?

She felt this wasn't quite the party she had been expecting. This was no time for board games. She couldn't find Clantail, either. No one stood out in a crowd like she did. Shadow Gale came to a stop and looked to the right. Not there. She looked to the left. Her eyes met another's.

"Are you searching for someone?"

"Y-yeah. Sort of," Shadow Gale replied.

It was a robot the size of a child. She was smooth and glossy on the surface, unlike a living creature. Was she a magical girl, or was she something else? Shadow Gale couldn't figure it out from her appearance and speech alone.

"Large crowds are tough. Here, have one of these." The robot offered a metallic tube covered in wrapping paper decorated with Santa Clauses and reindeer. Sticks of various colors were poking out from inside it.

"…Churros?" asked Shadow Gale.

"You need something sweet when you get tired."

Shadow Gale nodded, bent over, and pulled out a pink churro. It was flaky and came apart on her tongue, sweetness spreading through her mouth. A sigh slipped out of her. "So good…"

"Right?"

When Shadow Gale turned to the robot to thank her, she found the robot's hand held out, palm up. "That will be three hundred thousand yen."

"Huh…? You're charging— Wait, what's with that price?!"

"Of course I would not be able to give them away for free. This is not volunteer work."

"Uh, but this is a party… And more importantly, that pricing—"

"Hmmm. Well, take a look at this, then." The robot pulled a vividly colored slip of paper from her pocket, fluttering it in front of Shadow Gale. The cute fluorescent font read *for partygoers*. "This ticket indicates that I may attend a magical-girl Christmas party in a place beyond time and space. Do you have any complaints about this?"

"No…I don't." Seeing that, Shadow Gale couldn't complain. She didn't understand why she couldn't complain, but she just couldn't complain. "But…I don't have it. Three hundred thousand yen is just…"

"For individuals such as yourself, I allow payment with goods. In fact, I would even prefer if you paid with goods. That is why my prices are so ludicrous."

"Wait…what did you just say?"

"Never mind. More importantly, I request goods from you. You are also a magical girl, yes? Surely you are capable of *something*, are you not? I am rather pressed for time, you know."

"Uh-huh… What kinds of goods, for example?"

"Such as a beam cannon that can mow down a whole area, or a missile that can blow up an entire building…"

"That sounds really dangerous…"

"Things are clearly heading in a dangerous direction! I have no doubt there will be some reckless types willing to do anything to remain a magical girl. In fact, I know people like that. I have a need for self-defense."

It was difficult to read the robot's facial expressions, but she appeared desperate. Besides, since Shadow Gale couldn't pay three hundred thousand yen, she had to do something.

"If attack is not an option, then how about defense?" the robot suggested. "It might be good to be able to defend against bullets or bombs. Since I may not necessarily be able to become allies with that woman."

"Uhhh…I don't know what you're talking about, but if it's just boosting your defense…"

All Shadow Gale had for materials was some leftovers from making those signs earlier, but she was dealing with a robot here.

Keeping an eye out around them all the while, Shadow Gale produced her wrench and scissors, making a surface coating to somehow raise the robot's defensive capabilities. She ran out of materials halfway, so she used colored cellophane lights for the defensive coating, which increased resistance to heat, projectiles, and impacts by 80 percent. That covered only the robot's front; there wasn't enough to do her back as well. Shields were for raising in front, though, so that shouldn't prove to be an issue. But she got the feeling that if she was honest with the robot about that, she'd complain about it, so Shadow Gale decided to stay silent.

"All finished," Shadow Gale said.

"Wow…I feel as if I have become somewhat more durable."

Leaving the robot to examine herself in the mirror, Shadow Gale hurried away. Impertinent types like that would endlessly demand more and more. Shadow Gale didn't want to be around her for long.

Right as she was thinking, *Now then, I have to look for Clantail*, there was a shriek. Turning toward the voice, she saw a magical girl flying up to the ceiling. She crashed into it, then fell to the floor on her back as the sounds of things breaking and multiple screams came at once. Then the screams spread farther and got louder.

Shadow Gale panicked. What was going on? Happy-looking drunks, magical girls enthusiastically cheering on the fight—it didn't seem like there was much point in asking those types. For now, she just approached the commotion, where she found a group of *Cutie Healer* cosplayers bickering among themselves. In the crowd surrounding them, Shadow Gale found a magical girl saying, "I'm not in the least surprised they would wind up like that."

"What happened?" Shadow Gale asked her.

"They were having a little chat about who's the strongest in *Cutie Healer*, and one girl apparently brought up Dark Cutie's name. When Cutie Altair heard Cutie Pearl say, 'You can't count Dark Cutie as a Cutie Healer,' she absolutely had a fit. Cutie Cloud tried to stop their tiff and was then smacked away, is what happened."

All these strange names had Shadow Gale at a loss. When Shadow Gale saw Cutie Healers, all she ever thought was, *I guess that's Cutie Healer*, and she couldn't recognize individual characters. She certainly didn't care about this stuff, but fans got hung up on these things, apparently. Still, their getting into a fight caused problems for her.

The quarreling became more intense. Shadow Gale could even hear what sounded like punching and kicking. Irresponsible comments like, “Someone stop them!” and “Where’s the host?” flew from around them. Did the host of the party have to handle even that, too? Wasn’t that too much responsibility?

Shadow Gale had been naive. She’d had no idea that hosting a party would be like this, and so she’d thrown this whole group together so haphazardly. She’d thought that if she just set up the venue, that would be the end of it, opening up the place despite not having the spine to accept whatever accidents might happen.

Now that things were like this, she had no choice but to place herself in the line of fire to resolve this problem. With grim determination in her heart, she took one, two steps forward, and then, on the third step, a magical girl was flung at her, so she backed up reflexively before steeling herself and proceeding once more. She heard murmuring all around and looked up automatically. They were not reacting to Shadow Gale. The crowds parted, and she could see someone beyond them. The murmuring got louder, starting from that direction. Shadow Gale doubted her eyes, and she doubted her head, too. But he was there, solid and real.

“Ho-ho-ho, did I keep you waiting?”

Red clothes, white beard, and a round stomach. The old gentleman who had appeared so suddenly could be none other than Santa Claus. Clantail appeared after the old man, pulling a giant sled, and piled on top of that sled was a mountain of white bags of appropriate size.

“I’ve brought presents for all good girls.”

Cheers broke out. All the magical girls went for Santa Claus at once. The fight was entirely forgotten. Shadow Gale lay a hand on the table beside her, letting out a deep breath. She realized belatedly that Clantail had put her head on the antlers of the reindeer—in other words, her lower body was the reindeer.

◇ Micchan the Dictionary

“Hey, Missan, chasing down every single person in this crowd and looking up where they’re going feels kinda like, gimme a break, you know—and hey, you’d normally think it’s just impossible— Hey,

Missan.”

“You’re the one who got carried away because you got to make a cake on their dime, so that’s the work you have to do.”

Glassianne was still complaining, but Micchan turned off her headset, cutting her off. The more Glassianne complained, the better she worked.

“*Kigurumi* to *igurumi*,” Micchan said, and the Santa Claus costume disappeared, turning into *igurumi*—an arrow with a string on it.

The magical girl who’d been inside the suit rubbed her arms, saying “Yikes, it’s cold,” while the reindeer magical girl put her down in the wheelchair she’d been pushing from behind.

“Thanks to the both of you for your efforts,” said the girl in the wheelchair.

The reindeer magical girl shook her head, as did Micchan. Though it had been a bit of effort, they were getting paid for a party where nobody was getting offed, which was something to be glad about. From the parking lot, she could hear the voices of magical girls loudly chattering.

“But I’m impressed you could gather so many people. You’re surprisingly well connected,” the girl continued.

The reindeer magical girl gave a little shake of her head. “I only invited two people, but one person called the next, and we got more,” she replied, then tilted her head. “It wasn’t a surprise party?”

“What made you think that?”

“I was told to keep it a secret from you, so I assumed we were surprising you.”

“I have sharp ears. Even if you mean to keep things a secret, I’ll wind up catching wind of it.”

The reindeer magical girl nodded a few times like this made sense to her, then bowed her head. “I’ll help with the cleanup,” she offered, before rushing off to do just that.

“I must get back before my absence is noticed,” the girl in the wheelchair said, and, turning her wheelchair along the mountain trail in the opposite direction from the parking lot, she happened to look up at the sky and held out her palm.

It was snow. Tiny white flakes wafted down, then vanished. It made Micchan feel rather sentimental, but she shook her head. The little bell on her hat tinkled. As she raced after her boss as she went up the mountain trail in her wheelchair, the sound of her bell followed them both.

“We finished scouring the list of attendees,” Micchan said. “No problems with any of them.”

“Excellent.”

“What about at the Magical Girl Resources Department?”

“That party finished early, so I slipped out. I’ve always committed to the sickly act. If I feign illness, all is forgiven.”

Micchan had thought that was an important party, with even mages from other departments and the Central Authority in attendance, but the boss tossed out that remark without another thought.

Micchan tried to choose her words, but she wound up abandoning that and asking point-blank. “What were you trying to do with this whole thing?”

“I was thinking that next year, we should throw a truly fun Christmas party. This was just practice.”

New Year's and a Tortoise

This story takes place shortly before the end of *Magical Girl Raising Project limited*.

Debut

Magical Girl Raising Project School Calendar 2016
(Tsukuru no Mori) bonus short story collection
Magical Girl Raising Project: Circle of Life

New Year’s and a Tortoise

Tepsekemei had become very busy ever since she started living with that one magical girl. The girl had remodeled the house in order to properly secure its defenses, and Tepsekemei followed along for the “work” that the magical girl said you couldn’t live without doing and helped. And on top of that, the things she normally had to do—like eating, drinking, searching, poking, biting, and hitting—weren’t going to go away, either.

And then even on top of *that*, there were lots of things she had to learn.

Through observing the places where people gathered, watching TV, and reading books, she learned words. She had learned from a book that a book is called a book, and she had learned from the television that a television is called a television. There was also something called a newspaper, but that was still too hard for Tepsekemei. If she kept on learning things, she would eventually be able to master a newspaper as well.

But never mind the newspaper. Right now, she was more concerned with how around her, close to the house, something was changing.

The television had been changing, too. Books didn’t change, but the places where humans gathered were changing. Tepsekemei had decided once or twice in the time between when the sun came out and then went away that she would float up over the house, and looking down from above, she could really tell. Over there, and over there, and over there, and over there, there were more decorations and lights, sparkling and shining. The people walking around in the distance somehow looked like they were enjoying themselves. They were doing that “smile” thing that Tepsekemei had a hard time with.

A repetition of the “morning,” when it became bright, and the “night,” when it darkened, was one day. After a repetition of many days, it got hot, then cold. The repetition of becoming hot and then cold was a year. After a repetition of many years, you died. That was a life. All this she had learned from a book.

These were things Tepsekemei hadn't known, back when she'd had humans looking after her. It seemed that humans had cared for the tortoise Mei; they'd maintained a constant temperature in her enclosure, fed her, and kept things humid, all so that she wouldn't die. That was why Tepsekemei was still alive now.

But Tepsekemei preferred now over the time when she'd been taken care of by humans. This was fun. She thought that might be just the reason she also had to do tough things. Tough things always followed fun things. So be careful, boys and girls. That was what the television had said.

The trees, grass, bugs, everything in the garden had lost its energy. That was because it was getting cold. But the places where humans gathered and the television were not losing energy. You could even say they had gotten more energetic. They started making lots of noise and put on lots of lights, and they looked like they had a lot of energy. Humans made it so that they could keep living even when it got cold or hot by changing their "clothes." Since it had been getting cold, humans would put on more clothes to resist the cold. But they were not only resisting it. They were getting more and more energetic. Even if they were using clothing, it was a little strange.

Tepsekemei tried asking the magical girl she was living with, "Why?"

"Oh, that's because Christmas is coming."

"Christmas?"

"Santa Claus will come in a sleigh pulled by reindeer to give out presents."

"Why?"

"Uh, why…? That's the sort of event it is."

"Anyone who gives you things without any strings attached is just trying to trick you."

"That's the one area where you're weirdly clever…and hey, you know some pretty difficult words."

"Anyone who claims they've got something real nice for you is a con artist."

"Maybe you're watching too much TV…"

"Pythie Frederica was like that, too."

"Uh, well, you might be right… But hey, why can you actually remember the names of enemies, but you still won't remember my name?"

"Santa Claus is a con artist."

"No, he's not. Umm… Oh yeah, there are strings attached, actually. Santa Claus only gives presents to good kids. He doesn't give anything to naughty little boys and girls."

"Good kids."

"Yeah, good kids. This makes children try hard to be good and moves the world in a better direction. Look, you can tell that Santa Claus isn't just giving out presents for nothing, right? He's trying to use presents to make the world a better place. So it's okay, he's not a con artist. He's a good guy."

"Mei is a good kid, too."

"You're so sure, huh…?"

After the magical girl taught her about Santa Claus, there was a repetition of many nights and mornings, and then it was morning again. There was a boot full of candy placed beside Tepsekemei's lamp, with a card that read, *To Tepsekemei, a good kid, from Santa Claus*.

Chocolate, caramel, candy. When Tepsekemei took off the sparkly wrappers, the inside was also sparkly and pretty.

Not only were they pretty, but when she tried putting them in her mouth, they were all delicious. When she sucked on them slowly, or bit into them and crunched on them, they were sweet.

As she ate the candies, Tepsekemei understood: Santa Claus was real. There was clearly someone who did exist and who was trying to control the children of the world, using presents as bait.

She had solved the mystery of Christmas. But the mysteries kept on coming. Even though Christmas had ended, the places where people gathered and the television did not lose their energy. In fact, she got the feeling that they were getting even livelier.

"Why?" Tepsekemei asked the magical girl.

"Oh, that's because New Year's Day is coming."

"New Ear's Day? Santa Claus?"

"No, Santa Claus isn't coming."

"So what's coming?"

"What's coming…? It's hard to sum it all up. There's lots of stuff, okay?"

Apparently, the magical girl was busy with some other kind of "work," and she hardly explained things before returning to her room. Left all alone, Tepsekemei thought about New Ear's Day. But the only thing she figured out was that there was no way she could understand with this explanation.

There were a number of ways to learn something. Read books. Watch television. Have the magical girl teach her. And one more: Have someone *other* than the magical girl teach her. The mage who came to the house only ever came occasionally, so Tepsekemei couldn't count on her to explain things. There were lots of humans besides those two, so Tepsekemei thought that if she could get some human to teach her, that would be good.

The magical girl did not like it if Tepsekemei went outside as Tepsekemei. But Tepsekemei wanted to go outside in this form. When she talked about what she should do, the magical girl looked very distressed as she thought and thought and thought and thought and then came up with something.

Tepsekemei owned a board atop a stake that had WATCH OUT FOR PURSE SNATCHERS written on it. This was called a "sign."

Her magical-girl roommate told her that if she carried this, it was okay if she looked a little different from ordinary people. She just shouldn't fly or divide herself into clones or make herself bigger; carrying this as she walked around on her feet would suffice. Tepsekemei pulled that sign out from the bottom of the big treasure chest that contained her lamp, Christmas boot, and candy wrappers and brought it outside. She went to a place where there were lots of people. She just had to get people there to teach her about New Ear's Day.

As she was using her legs for a while to walk, Tepsekemei noticed that a man was looking at her. She tried asking that man.

"New Year's?" he said. "Sending out holiday cards to everyone is such a hassle, eh? So anyway, are there really purse snatchers around here?"

She tried asking a woman.

"My, how cute. New Year's? Hmm, then *shiruko* soup? *Ozoni* soup? Oh, and if you're talking about mochi, then there's mochi pounding as well. And speaking of mochi, you have such soft, mochi-like skin. I envy you."

She tried asking a child, too.

"For games, there's *hagoita* rackets and blindfolded pin-the-nose-on-the-*fukuwarai*, and spinning tops and flying kites, I guess. But I don't do that kind of stuff anymore. I'd rather get my New Year's money. But right when I think I'm gonna get lots of cash, every single year, my parents take like half of it. It's a total rip-off. They say they're saving it for my future or whatever, but it's pretty fishy."

She tried asking someone older, too.

"I'm thinking I'll go visit my local shrine for my first visit of the year. They say that's the best place to make resolutions for the coming year, after all."

She also tried asking male and female mates.

"How about the first dream of the new year? Get a sense of what my luck will be like for the year."

"But before that, there's our *hime-hajime*. Start your year off with a bang, if you know what I—"

"Hey! Agh, don't say stuff like that!"

Tepsekemei acquired various kinds of information. She recorded each and every item with a notepad and pencil, and once the pencil lead got short, she used a wind blade to wear down the end and sharpen it. There really was more to be gained from investigating outside the house than inside.

There was too much information compared with Christmas. That was easier to understand, with Santa Claus and presents. This was confusing. It seemed that New Ear's Day was more complicated than Christmas.

She had to know more. She had to learn more. Studying was important, in order to live among humans. It had said on the television that if she didn't know anything, then she would be eaten alive. Tepsekemei considered using the television and books to deepen her understanding of New Ear's Day even further, based on the information she had gained, but the humans changed faster than she could gather that information.

Back when Tepsekemei had not been Tepsekemei, moving slowly had never caused problems. Calmly and quietly, at her own pace, she had eaten her food, pooped, and gazed out of her tank. She'd also never been aware that outside the tank was outside the tank, or that she was getting food from humans, or even that she was herself, living a slow life.

But unlike air and food, humans would not necessarily keep to

Tepsekemei's pace. The humans' territory changed faster than the tree leaves dried up and fell. The things lined up at "shops" changed. There were rows of white, hard things of two or three levels on top of each other. Red and white papers were combined to hang. There were faces and pretty things stuck to large weapons.

Not only the outside, but the inside changed as well. The magical girl seemed more busy than usual. "Let's do a deep clean of the house for the new year." "Let's cook *osechi.*" It seemed it was all in preparation for handling New Ear's Day. Tepsekemei helped the magical girl. She didn't understand what she was doing now, but it was surely something that had to be done for New Ear's. So she believed.

After that, the sun came out and disappeared over and over, and then, finally, it got cold. Outside, things were all fancy, and inside the television was even more fancy. Something was changing. Slowly, bit by bit. Upward, onward, rising, moving on, and then going even further, to the top. Or even higher? She could tell things were about to go to some great place.

During the time when there was no sun—once it was night—somewhere, something made noise. The magical girl said it was the *joya-no-kane*, and each stroke of that bell, apparently, would make all earthly temptations disappear. There would be one hundred and eight rings of the bell total. *Humans do some incredible things*, Tepsekemei thought while slurping on soba. She liked soba with lots of green onions.

"Is it New Ear's Day yet?" she asked her magical-girl roommate.

"Right now, it's New Year's Eve. It's not quite New Year's Day."

Humans inside the television had been making noise. Tepsekemei knew about this. What they were doing was singing and dancing. When something happy happened, or when something fun happened, humans would sing and dance. Were they happy and having fun because New Ear's Day was coming?

After that, Tepsekemei and the magical girl repeated the exchange of "Is it New Ear's Day now?" and "Not yet" many times, until, finally, it came.

"Is it New Ear's Day now?"

"Yes, it is. Happy New Year. Now I'll go make some *ozoni.*"

New Ear's Day had arrived. For Christmas, Santa Claus had come. Just what would come for New Ear's? Tepsekemei had not prepared at all for this. Didn't she have to prepare somehow, just like she had to be a good kid, or she couldn't get presents from Santa Claus?

"What's a happy New Ear?"

"It's a greeting. It's the New Year's version of 'good morning' or 'hello.'"

"Happy New Ear."

"Yes, same to you."

It seemed that New Ear's Day had come without Tepsekemei realizing it. What should she do? How should she handle it? She still hadn't settled the matter. She was flipping through her notes, thinking about her New Ear's strategies, when the mage came over.

"Happy New Year, Mana," said the magical girl.

"Happy New Ear."

"Yeah, likewise," the mage replied. "Let's have another good one."

"Tepsekemei, bring Mana some tea."

What came on New Ear's Day was not Santa Claus but a mage. Tepsekemei brought tea to the mage sitting on the sofa and examined her face.

"Hmm? What is it?" the mage asked, considering a bit before her expression changed. Tepsekemei knew. She had researched human faces, times when they smiled in particular. That face wore a smirk.

"You want your money for the new year, huh? Ha, I got you one, of course. Be grateful." The mage pulled a red paper envelope from her purse and handed it to Tepsekemei.

Tepsekemei remembered what she had written down on her notepad. There had been New Ear's money there. So was what the mage was handing her right now that *otoshidama*? It seemed that she was safely managing New Ear's Day, but she couldn't let her guard down. Carelessness would lead to death. Tepsekemei mentally repeated what words came next.

It all started with: "New Year's money."

"Uh-huh."

"Total rip-off."

"Huh? Really? 7753 did that?"

"Saving for the future."

"Ahhh, true, that's important."

It seemed she was smoothly managing this conversation. So this was correct, after all. With the certainty that by using the words in her notepad she could survive New Ear's Day, Tepsekemei continued with "First shrine visit."

"Hmm? Yeah, why not? Didn't realize you were so devout."

That didn't feel quite right. She got the feeling that she hadn't quite made the proper connections. "Mochi skin."

"What?"

That wasn't right.

"Fukuwarai."

"What's wrong?"

Nope. "First dream."

"Where's this coming from…?"

Not that, either. *"Hime-hajime."*

"Huh? What? What the heck are you—?"

Sensible Tepsekemei noticed that the mage's voice had gotten louder. This reaction was clearly different from when she had mentioned mochi skin, *fukuwarai,* and the first dream of the year.

In other words, this was the right word.

"Hime-hajime! Hime-hajime! Hime-hajime! Hime-hajime!"

"Don't say it over and over!"

"You gotta do that for New Ear's Day."

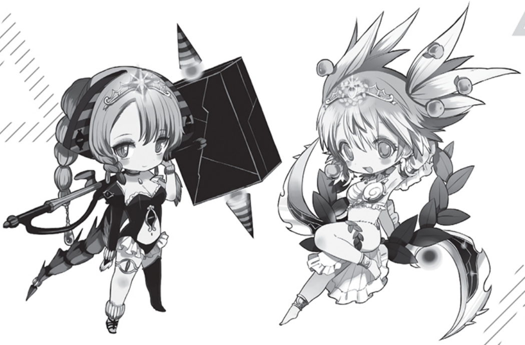
"Wait, wait, wait, wait!"

"Do it."

"What do you mean, 'do it'?! Hey… You… S-stay back! 7753! 7753! Get over here and stop this girl! Whoa! Don't do that! Hey!!"

Princess of the Beach

This story takes place shortly before the events of *Magical Girl Raising Project JOKERS.*



Debut

Magical Girl Raising Project School Calendar 2016
(Tsukuru no Mori) bonus short story collection
Magical Girl Raising Project: Circle of Life

Princess of the Beach

Practically every time they were on break in the briefing room, they'd all get worked up over a conversation about some trivial subject. When someone asked what their favorite season was, they answered, "I like snow, so winter, I guess," or "Fall's nice because the food is so good," or "Definitely spring." Inferno, meanwhile, declared that summer was the best season for the Pure Elements.

Swinging around her scimitar, she insisted passionately, "These outfits are too cold for spring and fall. We're in swimsuits; that's summer clothes."

Deluge thought that Inferno's costume—the other three of them aside—was more like underwear than a swimsuit, but she didn't say that out loud.

"You're not in a swimsuit, you're in underwear. You've even got garters." Tempest lacked Deluge's restraint, however, and flatly spoke her mind.

"If you take the garters off, I'm in the clear," Inferno replied, to which Quake said with a laugh, "Okay, that just sounds really bad." Deluge laughed as well. "You're right," she agreed.

"But it's summer now," said Inferno. "This is the season of the Pure Elements! So, like, don't you think we should do something special? Something awesome?"

"Why's summer the Pure Elements' season?" asked Tempest. "You're the one who likes summer, Inferno. I like spring more, so the Pure Elements' season is spring."

"But the Pure Elements' season is the summer 'cause of our clothes… Oh, I know, let's test it out."

"Test what out?"

"It's summertime! And summer means the beach. I think we should all go to the beach and test out how summery the Pure Elements are. How about it?"

"Hey, we can't go to the beach as magical girls."

"We won't know until we try! C'moooonnn. I'm sure Ms. Tanaka'll say it's a great idea!"

"I don't know about that…"

◇ Princess Deluge

When they'd become magical girls, Ms. Tanaka had told them to keep their identities a secret. You never knew who would be leaking information to the Disrupters. They had to keep that they were magical girls a secret, even from their family and friends. She said they also had to avoid behavior that would make people realize they were magical girls.

But despite that, she'd said they were allowed to go to the beach this time. She'd very kindly even gotten them bus tickets for the round trip. And it wasn't someplace where they wouldn't have to worry about being seen, like a private beach, or an empty island way out in the middle of the ocean. It was a well-known swimming beach crowded with tourists.

Tempest was in high spirits, and Inferno was, too, unsurprisingly, going on about how pumped she was about summer. Though Quake didn't appear as wildly excited about it, she was watching Tempest and Inferno with a kind, maternal smile. It didn't seem as if she saw any problems with the situation.

In order to be more discreet, they changed into T-shirts, hoodies, and cotton pants, removing their accessories and retying their hair. But even after doing all that, the four magical girls stood out. And when people who stood out were being loud on top of that, they stood out even more.

Was it okay for them to be drawing attention? It was kind of thoughtless to assume it would be fine, so long as they weren't found out, wasn't it? Deluge felt a sigh coming on but kept it to herself. Worrying about this and waffling around when Ms. Tanaka had given them permission would be her loss. Acting like this, she was no different from when she was an ordinary human, as Nami Aoki.

Deluge made up her mind. She was going to enjoy herself, too, while also covering for all the others, to avoid drawing attention as much as possible and keep from exposing their true identities. This was the beach, after all—anywhere with water was Princess

Deluge's home turf. Here she could make the best of her unique powers, which were hard to use at the lab.

Then, right as she was managing to feel just a little positive…

"Ohhh! Look! Over there! The ocean!" Tempest leaned forward over Deluge's lap.

Deluge looked where Tempest was pointing. Bright light was pouring in through the windows. On the other side of the guardrail was sandy beach and the ocean.

◇ Princess Inferno

The banner fluttering in the parking lot was covered in a cutesy font reading Beach Volleyball Tournament, along with an adorable illustration of a girl doing a somersault receive. There were faint signs of something else having been erased, and with the light coming from behind the banner, you could see fragments of words: —fiend Cram—Hell— Maybe the sign had been repurposed from some other event.

Tempest undid her ponytails while Deluge tied her own hair into ponytails. Quake just undid her braids, but she had more hair than anticipated, and she came off as the most different of the four of them. Their clothing wasn't any more or less revealing than usual, but it felt freeing. Removing the fetters that were their costumes and walking around in broad daylight in outfits that were as revealing as underwear felt liberating in a way that they couldn't get with their magical-girl activities at night.

Tempest's healthy thighs sprang along whether she flew or ran, Quake's chest shook in a weighty way just from her laughter, and Deluge's slender figure moved with grace.

Inferno gave her own bust and hips a couple gropes each, nodding deeply at the feeling of their presence—soft, but also abundantly springy. "We're all so sexy."

"How can you say that so seriously…?" Deluge muttered. "More importantly, Inferno, Quake, what are you doing with your tails?"

"Ah, I can shrink mine," Inferno answered.

"The heck? First I've heard about that," said Quake.

Making her scorpion tail smaller so it didn't stand out was doable. It kinda made her get tired faster, and it also meant losing a means of attack, so normally, there was no point in doing it. In addition to that, she also wrapped a sarong around her waist.

“If we hide them with sarongs like this, it should be okay, right?” said Inferno. If she wrapped it firmly, there’d be no problem, no matter how much she jumped or hopped around in public.

Tempest said, “I’ll be back in a minute,” and raced out from the parking lot, and Quake said, “Me too,” before running off as well. Deluge was confused, going, “Huh? Are we just doing our own thing?” But when she tried to make a break for the beach, Inferno grabbed her by the shoulder, stopping her.

“Huh? What is it?”

“Do you know the rules of beach volleyball, Deluge?” Inferno asked her.

“I’ve played volleyball at school.”

“I’ll teach you the rules about setting and passing before we start playing.”

“Huh? Sorry, I don’t get what you’re talking about.”

Inferno’s eyelashes fluttered as she winked. “Let’s aim for the championship at beach volleyball!”

“Wait, what? I’m playing, too?”

“Yeah, duh. You’ve gotta play in pairs to participate.” Deluge was still confused, but Inferno prodded her in the back. They were headed to the site of the beach volleyball game. “If we team up, then victory will be ours. I mean, we’re a fire-and-water combo!”

“I feel like those cancel each other out…”

Princess Inferno—that is, Akari Hiyama—couldn’t run at full speed anymore. By becoming a magical girl, she could once again go as fast as her heart desired. That alone was plenty to be happy about.

But she thought that if she could compete in something, and if she could win, she’d be even happier. Cooperating with all the Pure Elements to fight Disrupters wasn’t bad. But at heart, Inferno—Akari Hiyama—was about competition. She wanted to compete with someone. And she wanted to win.

A little crowd had gathered at the edge of the beach. There were lines of those flags for the beach volleyball tournament, and it looked like there were also costumed mascots and cosplayers. Tugging Deluge by the hand, Inferno raced toward the crowd.

◇ Princess Quake

Swimsuit time—an indispensable part of magical-girl-hood, as the rumors went.

Princess Quake strolled through the beach with a sketchbook in one hand. Even walking along the hot sand in her bare feet, she didn't get burned. She could go elegantly along the shore without any preparation.

And not only did she not need sandals, she didn't need sunscreen, either. She didn't get sunburned. Ms. Tanaka had assured them that magical-girl skin was not damaged by UV rays. So even wearing an outfit with a frightening ratio of skin exposure, she'd have no problems at all.

But as Chiko Satou, she'd have had nothing but problems. While mentally expressing her gratitude with a *Thank you, magical girls*, she opened up her sketchbook. Searching for her mark among the swimmers, she found one. With magical-girl vision, whether the one she sought was riding an inflatable boat far out in the water or buried in sand at the end of the beach, Quake could find her. Once again, she mentally expressed gratitude: *Thank you, magical girls.*

She began to sketch: a child playing by the water's edge, a child grasping an inflatable ring as she swam, a blindfolded child hitting a watermelon with a bat. The children in swimsuits were reminiscent of the angels that appeared in religious paintings.

As she was diligently sketching away, Quake heard someone call, "Hey you, lady, over there." The voice was close, so she looked up from her sketchbook to see a young man with hair somewhere between brown and orange right in front of her face. She anxiously looked all around, but nobody else was there. In other words, this guy was talking to her.

Oh no, she thought. She wasn't doing something she could be proud of. Closing her sketchbook and pasting on a look like she wasn't doing anything bad, she responded, "Yes?"

The man was grinning widely. She looked back at him vacantly for a while before she understood what he was after, and then she got anxious for different reasons. She'd thought some lifeguard was going to take her to task for her suspicious behavior, but this guy was trying to pick her up, wasn't he? Since Quake had never thought she'd be the target of such a thing, she had no idea how to respond, and she just bowed her head a bunch saying "Pardon me, I'm sorry," as if she'd done something wrong, before somehow making her escape in a dithering flurry.

She'd never imagined such a disaster would befall her. *The world really is a frightening place*, she thought as she looked ahead to see more men with smiling faces.

After that, men hit on her at nearly every corner. She couldn't possibly reject them tactfully, but neither could she acquiesce to their invitations, and so she clutched her sketchbook as she went off this way and ran off that way, over and over. Running around like this, she had no time to sketch. Even when using the concealment techniques she'd learned as Chiko Satou and attempting to move from shadow to shadow, she was easily found, and guys would approach her, saying, "What's up?"

Princess Quake was not at all suited to hiding.

Confused, anxious, and alarmed, she also felt apologetic about them talking to her when she was originally Chiko, and also just a little bit glad, and then on top of that she even felt embarrassed for being in a swimsuit—why was it so skimpy, showing off her belly button, thighs, and even cleavage to an indeterminately large number of people? She tried to make herself as small as possible, but her soft and shapely chest and her seductive figure would not allow that. It was a dilemma: If she awkwardly attempted to make herself small and hide her chest with her sketchbook, the act emphasized her bust and made her look even more sexual. Quake was running around in confusion, restraining the urge to dig a hole on the spot and crawl into it, when she discovered Tempest—her own deus ex machina.

She started rushing to Tempest but then stopped. Tempest was being spoken to by a guy who looked like the frivolous type, and it seemed he was clearly trying to pick her up, but she turned him aside with a smile and briskly walked away. She was so composed and dignified, head and shoulders above Quake in terms of feminine maturity. Hit with an indescribable sense of defeat, Quake was unable to call out to Tempest as she watched her walk off so elegantly and confidently.

◇ Princess Tempest

Princess Tempest had had ulterior motives in becoming a magical girl. She'd become a member of the Pure Elements because she wanted to be able to take a form appropriate for Shou, her crush, who was in middle school. She was the kind of magical girl who defiantly thought that even if her motives were impure, since she was fighting the bad Disrupters and protecting justice every day, there was no problem.

There was nothing fun about walking along the beach in a swimsuit if she was in her human form, that of the second grader Mei Higashionna. But if Princess Tempest was walking around on the beach in a risqué swimsuit—then what about that?

Princess Tempest was charming and beautiful. Her costume was provocative—Inferno had even joked about it: "I think you've got the number one sexiest costume of the Pure Elements. Careful you're not breaking any laws, Tempest!"

And that very Princess Tempest…was walking on the beach!

She took a step forward with her long, slender white legs, crunching the sand underfoot. With just that single movement, she felt eyes around her. She felt the commotion. Her magical-girl ears did not miss any of the tiniest whispers.

"Is she a TV celeb? Or a pop star…?"

"No, I've never seen her on TV."

Excellent—this was great. Thinking she'd show herself off a little harder, she tightened the straps of her swimsuit, bringing her chest up and together. She'd heard that adult women did this.

When Tempest pushed her breasts up so they were squeezed together, the people all around made a stir.

"Whoa…"

"You go talk to her."

"I get the feeling she's a little too young, though… You think she's of age?"

Unlike the adults, who were a ways away babbling on like that, a boy of around middle school age, who looked like he'd screwed up his courage to approach, came to talk to her. When he asked, "Wanna hang out?" and she asked back, "To do what?" he said, "I have a boat." When she asked, "What else?" he replied, "If we get sick of the beach, we could do karaoke or bowling or something," so she turned him down. Flying was more fun than a boat, and the school rules said you had to be with an adult to go to karaoke or bowling. If he'd challenged her to a match in *Magical Battlers*, the card game that was super popular at her elementary school, then she'd have been forced to accept, and she did think that if he'd at least gone with dodgeball or different kinds of tag—or watermelon smashing, since they were at the beach—that would’ve been something else.

But today, Princess Tempest would rather be doing this. She was getting so much attention just by walking. It was fun.

She would walk the beach from one end to the other, she decided, and became lost in her bliss. It was for the sake of this day that she'd watched those DVDs of fashion shows. She was walking with a slow and stunning strut, using the method she'd researched, with the attention and compliments making her even more ecstatic, when the smell of yakisoba tickled her nose.

Yakisoba!

She'd left the house saying she was going to the beach with her friends. She'd gotten a proper allowance for it, too. Inferno had said the yakisoba at the beach was really good. For it to be even better than the yakisoba she normally had—Tempest couldn't imagine how delicious it would be.

Tempest pulled a sudden turn for the yakisoba, but then she caught something moving quickly out of the corner of her eye. It was Quake. It seemed as if she was sneaking around, hiding behind the stall.

Quake? Why's she here?

Quake was staring at her. But why? Quake was another one of the Pure Elements, just like her, so there was no reason for her to be watching Tempest now. And there was definitely no reason for her to be hiding.

In front of the yakisoba stand, Tempest pondered this. Quake was the leader. The leader had a position of responsibility. She had to be thinking about the other members. Was she worrying about Tempest? But Tempest wasn't doing anything that would make her worry. She was just walking around. Even if a guy tried to pick her up, it was easy to run away, so there really was no problem.

She thought hard about what had Quake so worried, and when she hit on it, she cried out. Ignoring the middle-aged man at the yakisoba stall who said to her with concern, "Are you all right, miss?" Tempest understood what it was Quake was worried about.

Tempest had become a magical girl for Shou. But walking from one end of the beach to the other to get attention from this indeterminately large number of people was basically a betrayal of him.

Tempest had hinted to Quake that she had a crush on someone.

She had also been thinking she would try asking for advice about it soon. *That* was why Quake was worried. She had to be thinking, *Is it okay for Tempest to be doing something like that when she has someone she likes?*

Tempest hung her head. She felt embarrassed, remorseful. She hadn't become a magical girl to go gallivanting on the beach. She'd forgotten what she'd become a magical girl for and had gotten carried away.

"Two yakisobas, mister," Tempest told the guy at the stall.

"Here ya go."

Carrying a plastic plate of yakisoba in each hand, Tempest went to talk to Quake, who was hiding behind the stall. "Quake, let's have yakisoba together."

"Huh?! Oh, Tempest? Wow! What a coincidence, running into you in a place like this."

The mouthful of yakisoba she slurped down had a faintly salty taste, and it wasn't just the sauce.

◇◇◇

When Quake and Tempest returned to the parking lot, Inferno was sitting with her knees pulled up to her chest, and Deluge was saying something to her. It was abundantly clear that she was consoling Inferno.

"Did something happen?" asked Quake.

"Um, well…the beach volleyball tournament was a bit harder than she'd thought," Deluge explained.

"You guys didn't win?"

"We lost in the first round."

"Damn it!" Inferno cried, raising a clenched fist aloft. "We should've used Ultimate Princess Explosion!"

"No, no, we couldn't do that," said Deluge.

"Hang on—if you two couldn't win, then just how hard was this tournament?" Quake asked.

"The cosplayers and the people in mascot costumes were incredible. They had these explosions and lights," said Inferno.

"True, they *were* amazing," Deluge agreed.

"No matter how much their opponents tried, that team wouldn't let them onto the court. They were using hypnosis and stuff."

“Umm, that sounds more like…”

Inferno rose to her feet. Her eyes were practically alight. “Apparently, they have that tournament every year! So next year—next year, we’ll pass the first round… No, to victory! We aim for victory and start training now! Let’s run straight home!”

Deluge smirked, exhausted, then turned back to Tempest and Quake. “What’s up with you guys?”

“I’m racked with guilt.”

“I just feel defeated…”

“I don’t really get it, but…lots of stuff happened…”

“Come on! Let’s go! Last place buys the winner a can of juice!” Inferno raced off ahead of the others. Quake and then Tempest followed, the latter booing.

Turning her thoughts to next year’s beach volleyball tournament, Deluge dashed after them as well.

The Archfiend Cram School's Hell Survival Games

This story takes place a while before the events of *Magical Girl Raising Project.*

Debut

Preorder bonus with *An Assortment of Items Made by Magicaloid 44's Futuristic Gadget* Boss Battle Magical Item Creation Kit*!* also known as *Magical Girl Raising Project C88: The Super Magical Girl Set for Aspiring Heroes!* (Tsukuru no Mori)

The Archfiend Cram School's Hell Survival Games

A magical girl in a snappy all-black suit picked up her microphone, while the magical girl sitting beside her, whose costume was also all black—and extremely skimpy—cleared her throat quietly.

"And now! It's finally begun!" said the magical girl in the suit. "The Thirty-Sixth Archfiend Cram School Survival Games! Reporting live on the scene is me, your announcer, Pammy! And commentary will be provided by the woman everyone knows, Archfiend Cram School commander in chief, Ms. Archfiend Pam! Pam, thank you very much for today."

"Yes, and thank you...," said Archfiend Pam. "Introductions aside, there's no such position as commander in chief at the school—"

"Anyway, they say even demons wouldn't dare try their hand at the Archfiend Cram School's famous Hell Survival Games! This time, for the thirty-sixth games, I hear we're taking things in a very different direction."

"I wouldn't say that demons—"

"Yes, yes, I understand! It's supposed to be an educational event for learning about your own strengths and weaknesses and self-improvement. But society sees these events much more cynically. And there are very much indeed people who think of this as a wild brawl for scary people to vent their stress. That's precisely why we have to emphasize that this event is not *only* for the purpose of wild violence."

"That's right, and so—"

"Yeah, you've got it! We're putting a spin or two on the usual event. Secondly, the venue has been expanded to accommodate increased capacity. Normally, the arena would be the size of a small village, but this time around, it's been scaled up to a space large enough for a whole big city to fit in, with all the combatants thrown in together, kicking and punching to determine who will be crowned the strongest. And then the third change is that the games will be recorded on video, and fourthly, it will also have announcing and commentary added! Fifth, and this is the best part: There is a prize for the winner. All these new features have never been present in past games. Since they were only exercises, after all. And this means that a lot of participants have come aiming for the prize money…whoops, pardon me, for the glory."

"About that—"

"The video recorded during this Survival Games will be edited and put on sale following the event. All participants, and everyone who wanted to join in but couldn't due to circumstances, as well as any other magical girls with an admiration for strength, please do make the purchase! For the first-run limited edition, as a special bonus, we will be including a collection of interviews with the participants filmed before the start of the event. Oh, even the extras are lavish!"

"…It's a good deal."

"And as for the rules, they're quite simple. All participants carry one flag, and they steal flags from each other to gather as many as possible within a limited time and area. And that's it! However, this is the Archfiend Cram School, the club that makes even demons shriek and devils cry. Students and graduates won't just be gently taking flags from each other. The scene of this game will become a hellscape that some call a modern Colosseum."

"We've taken safety precautions."

"Ten minutes after the starting signal, and it looks like some magical girls have begun fighting already!"

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The survival training held by the Archfiend Cram School is known for its intensity. I've heard rumors—though I couldn't say if they're true or not—that even the strongest fighters will run crying, and that the lucky ones escape, while some will fail even at that and lose their lives.

You need to sign a contract to participate, and apparently it stipulates stuff like, *"No matter what might happen to my person, everything is at my own risk, etc. etc."*

Being as it was such a dangerous event, those working to host it were extremely tense, too.

You had a bunch of strong fighters packed in close quarters. It wouldn't seem like the right place for an assassin's methods: giving them the knife when they let their guard down. But I'd chosen this day, and this place. I was convinced that I could do it. Archfiend Pam couldn't move around freely during the broadcast. That was an opportunity I could take advantage of.

I'd already cleared stage one. Archfiend Pam was commentating and hadn't realized she was in reach of an assassin after her life. Well, to be precise, I guess she wasn't doing much commentary at all. Well, that didn't matter. Whether she was just nodding along or commentating, my job was the same.

I would wait some more. I'm good at waiting. Those who are despised are used to patiently staying still. If I ever make the wrong move and get found, I get hit with a slipper or a rolled-up newspaper. The world is always cold to the outcasts all in black. Well, I'm vermin, so there's nothing surprising about that.

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"…These two," said Archfiend Pam.

"Ohhh, these two!" Pammy repeated. "The most notorious pair of the Archfiend Cram School have suddenly made contact! So let's autoswitch the cameras… It's this camera, right?"

"The first one is Marika Fukuroi, the Flower-Seller Girl."

"This one…the magical girl with the flower on her head, huh? She's rather quick to throw a punch and she's got a big mouth, so she has a lot of enemies, but you can't deny that she's strong…is what it says here. The documents I have here also recount other fearsome episodes, but I hope you'll forgive us for leaving them aside for now."

"And then this one…"

"This is Cranberry, Musician of the Forest. There are two possible ways to graduate: to be acknowledged by Archfiend Pam or to land a strike on Archfiend Pam, and she's the only magical girl to have achieved the latter, isn't she…? Archfiend Pam, is this true? If it is, that's amazing, isn't it?"

The vegetation looked as if it had never once been trimmed, growing wildly everywhere. They were evergreen trees. Their needles were wide and long, growing like splayed-out baseball gloves. Tall, with thick trunks, they had hard bark that ran in vertical strips. Dozens of types of plants grew in the thick underbrush, in all sizes, large to small. The tallest were enough to cover a human below the belt, and the leaves of the upper canopy let in only the odd spot of sunlight. No birds or beasts could be heard in this forest where two magical girls stood at the ready, about ten yards from one another.

"It's been a long time, Musician of the Forest."

Marika Fukuroi never smiled to be polite. She smiled only when she was having fun, and then she'd smile from the bottom of her heart. Perhaps it would be most accurate to describe her grin as that of a wild beast about to pounce on its prey.

"I'm glad you seem well, Fukuroi," Cranberry replied.

Magical girls were, without exception, lovely and beautiful to look at. Cranberry's apparent age was around twenty—comparatively on the older side, but she was no exception. Her facial features were balanced and pretty, and her smile was quite elegant.

But the fact that Cranberry could wear such a beautiful smile in a place like this spoke of her exceptional strength. Just how many magical girls out there could turn aside a threatening look from Marika Fukuroi with a smile?

"I should have made sure to pay my respects to you," Cranberry said.

"Hey, you don't have to be all respectful with me," Marika replied.

Marika's right foot took one step forward through the underbrush, and at just about the same moment, Cranberry came forward, too. The cool breeze blowing from the mountains rustled the leaves on the trees and made the underbrush murmur. The roses on Cranberry's shoulders swayed, and the rose that topped Marika's head trembled.

The announcer went "Oh-ho!" in a way that suggested being impressed or surprised. "The two of them actually get along, huh?"

"I wouldn't—"

"I see, I see, I see. So it's not quite that they get along, huh? I can tell from looking at these documents I've put together on the Archfiend Cram School, but these two haven't really had much contact, careerwise. Since Cranberry's time in the cram school was so brief… But considering that, they're having some lively conversation, huh? Perhaps this means that working for the Magical Girl Resources Department, Cranberry knows how to be social."

"It was my fault you couldn't give me a proper greeting," said Marika. "I was away dealing with some obligations. I just never thought anyone would graduate that fast, you know."

"Obligations?"

"An interview for a prospective husband."

"A marriage interview! My, my…"

"And now things have turned in a more private direction," said Pammy.

"Hmm." Archfiend Pam nodded.

"Does this mean Marika is a young woman of about that age bracket?"

A marriage interview.

Though she was a magical girl, she had a life as a human.

Archfiend Pam thought back. That reminded her that once, on some whim, Marika had brought cheesecake as a gift to the Cram School. She'd said she'd made it from flour and sugar refined from the plants she created with her magic, and Archfiend Pam had eaten some of it. Pam remembered. It had been very good.

It was surprising that Marika, who was feared as a mad dog even within the Archfiend Cram School, which was all about fighting, and who had caused problem after problem with her straight-out violence, actually had a domestic side. No matter how powerful a magical girl might be, 99 percent of the time, she was a girl or a woman pretransformation, so it wouldn't have been that strange for her to have attended a marriage interview. Had it gone well? Or not? What sort of situation had it been? What sort of partner had it been?

"Well, whatever her situation is, we've gotta give her a graduation celebration at least, right?"

"Let's make sure to have a nice celebration for her."

Even as they were thinking about the marriage interview, Marika and Cranberry were gradually coming closer to each other. Archfiend Pam felt ashamed for allowing herself such vulgar curiosity about the romantic affairs of a pupil. This was the Survival Games venue. What was needed here was not gossip, but battle.

“Well, then,” said Cranberry.

“Uh-huh.” Marika dropped to the ground. She disappeared, hidden in the weeds.

Cranberry raised one leg. Both her arms were raised in front of her chest.

The underbrush went down all at once, and then, a heartbeat later, bounced up again, topsoil and all. A sound that seemed to rip through ears became a hammer that struck the whole area. Using her magic to control sound, Cranberry had generated a shock wave.

The sound went over the volume transmission limit, making the microphone crackle loudly. It made Pam and Pammy slap their hands over their ears, and then, the moment the ringing sound cleared, the play-by-play and commentary resumed.

“First strike from Cranberry! As per her title, it’s an attack via sound! Archfiend Pam, that blow looked pretty powerful.”

“It wasn’t very good.”

“It wasn’t good? Really?”

“She didn’t announce her move.”

“She didn’t announce it? Oh yeah, they say that all the magical girls of the Archfiend Cram School make sure to announce their moves by name when they use them, huh?”

“Yes, that’s right.”

“A magical girl can strengthen her body and magic through strong emotion. And giving a name to a move and saying it out loud helps to envision it more strongly…is what it’s for, right?”

“That’s right.”

“I see… So then why did Cranberry not announce her move?”

“She graduated before I could tell her the importance of mental images…”

“Ohhh, she was only a member for a brief time, huh? Oh well.”

Cranberry spread her hands. The audio feedback from the microphone pierced everyone's ears, while simultaneously, the area around her burst open. It wasn't just the grass and the earth. Even the trees with roots buried deep down failed to withstand the aural battery, roots ripped up, branches flying, and trunks thick enough that an adult man's arms couldn't wrap all the way around snapped off.

The sound generated by Cranberry's magic would destroy any object, human, or magical-girl body. Given the nature of sound, the scale of the destruction was not a point, but an area. The magic spread at the speed of sound and couldn't be seen with the eye, with a wide area of effect. It was powerful enough that regular magical girls would all be mowed down as a mass, knocked out with blood flowing from their ears.

With scattered earth and grass fluttering downward and destroyed trees falling one after another, Marika Fukuroi was braced on the ground on all fours and had not moved one step from the spot.

"Has Marika Fukuroi been immobilized by the damage…?"

"No…"

Marika lifted her head. She was smiling.

The rose atop her head had changed shape to become a cross-shaped ax that had supported her body with its weight, its durable petals working as a shield that had guarded her from the attack. But still, she was up against sound. She couldn't completely protect herself from that. Part of Marika's costume was torn, and there were bruises on her exposed skin.

Blood dripping from her head and face, Marika tilted her head. "What about the move name?"

"…Oh, pardon me," Cranberry replied. "You're supposed to do that, hmm? I'll take care the next time."

"Hey, anyone can slip up."

"She got told off by her senior, huh?"

"Marika may seem like she does whatever she wants, but she actually sticks to the things she should stick to."

"Whoa now, Marika is charging forward!"

"Forte."

"Rosenkreuz!"

As grass and earth danced in the air, the flower petal ax brushed it aside by spinning violently, and while guarding herself from the impact, Marika quickly closed the distance between the two of them. The first *forte* came just after Marika leaped out, breaking up the earth, while the second burst open at her back—but it wasn't enough to stop her, and before Cranberry could fire the third, Marika was right in her face. Cranberry's *forte* was an area attack and hard to evade, but used at close range, it became a double-edged sword that would hit her as well.

Blood spewed. The rose cross ax sliced open Cranberry's shoulder. But it didn't make it to the bone. In a low stance, half sliding on the ground, Cranberry made a grab for her, which Marika met with her knee—Cranberry pushed her knee aside, and Marika kicked up that hand, but responding to the low-altitude attack made Marika lose her balance, and Cranberry immediately swept her pivot leg out from under her. Having been off balance to begin with, Marika's body lightly flew through the air. Cranberry readied a spear hand to strike her in the air, but right when she was about to thrust it forward, she froze.

Marika had stopped in midair. Rose vines extended from her head in every direction, wrapping around the trunk of a broken tree or piercing a bare rock face with their thorns to support Marika's body. After a breath's pause to shift the timing of her fall, Marika dropped, driving her fist out at Cranberry's spear hand, which came too late—then, without missing a beat, Cranberry switched to a roundhouse kick, which Marika blocked with an elbow.

"She was knocked back in midair, in a situation where she couldn't evade," explained Archfiend Pam.

"So she made her rose vines wrap around obstacles in the area. And by doing that, she changed the timing of her fall to evade Cranberry's attack, is that what you mean?"

"If Marika had attacked directly using her rose vines, Cranberry would have been able to handle it. And even when getting hit with an unorthodox attack—"

"And now they're face-to-face! It's a flowery face-off in hand-to-hand combat!"

Marika tried to wrap her arms around Cranberry's leg, but was pushed away, the push followed up by a backhand, which was turned aside, then the rose cross ax—blood flew, a knee locked a right hand, a leg grappled, yanked in—flipping who was on top at a dizzying rate, they rolled through the thicket.

Cranberry had her left leg wrapped around Marika's right, holding Marika's cross ax back with her bare hands. The moment Marika's attention shifted to her rose ax, Cranberry used their locked legs to flip them over, gripping Marika's torso in her thighs from either side. Cranberry was on top, straddling her.

"Cranberry got the upper hand! Is Cranberry superior in a ground fight?!"

"She's making use of their difference in size."

Though they were both magical girls, Cranberry's apparent age was around twenty, while Marika was comparatively younger and smaller. Cranberry had reach. If she secured a position of advantage and kept Marika from using the flower on her head, then none of Marika's attacks would reach.

Cranberry's fist aimed for Marika's jaw, but Marika turned to take it on the cheek and shoulder. Marika tried to twist her body around, but Cranberry's legs held her firmly in place. Cranberry's left hand kept the rose ax from moving. Though both Marika's hands were free, she couldn't reach Cranberry, positioned above her.

Cranberry landed a flurry of punches, *right right right right right right*, striking swiftly to keep Marika from grabbing her arm and also to prevent counterattack. Marika guarded her face with both arms, but Cranberry heedlessly battered her over her guard, and then, with a blow, blood flew.

"First blood! Marika is gushing blood!"

"…It's the other way around."

Blood was dripping from Cranberry's fist. It wasn't splatter from Marika. It was her own blood.

"Rosenschlange!"

Rose vines extended from Marika's head, tangling around her arms. The vines were densely populated by sharp thorns. By wrapping the vines around her arms as she blocked, she'd wounded Cranberry's fist.

Noticing her own bleeding, Cranberry paused for just an instant. Marika wasn't one to overlook such an opportunity. With Cranberry still straddling her, she kicked up with her knees to land an attack on Cranberry's back. As Cranberry was knocked off balance, the rose vines slid around her arms, entangling them.

Cranberry was bigger. But did she have more muscle strength? Hardly any magical girls in the Archfiend Cram School could beat Marika Fukuroi in a contest of pure strength. Overall size affected reach but had nothing to do with strength. There were magical girls out there who were toddler size but could still sumo a magic tank.

But Cranberry still resisted. She tried to pull back on the rose vines to drag Marika Fukuroi toward her, but she'd lost her balanced stance. Marika's second knee strike made her elegant smile twist in pain, and before the third strike landed, the rose vines reached Cranberry's chest.

"Now this is getting painful! What will the Musician of the Forest, Cranberry, do? She can't resist a thorny whip dragging her upper body forward!"

"…Here it comes."

Caught in the vines' grasp, Cranberry was pulled in, and her position with Marika Fukuroi underneath her was reversed. Now Marika was the one straddling her. Marika's grin was getting bigger and bigger, and Cranberry, who'd been showing her pain, now wore a small smile on her lips.

"Forte."

There was the sound of an explosion. The violent impact mowed down trees. Marika dropped herself down over Cranberry, while Cranberry burst up from below to grab at Marika's hair and yank her up, shoving her thumb into her eye socket in the same motion, but Marika slapped her forehead against Cranberry's finger —

"Forte."

Just as the two foes collided, the second sound blast came. Marika bent her body backward, and Cranberry aimed for the eye again, fingertip skimming her right eyeball. The *Rosenschlange* that had been wrapped around Cranberry was ripped away, and Cranberry was torn up all over, blood spurting everywhere. Marika kicked her, trying to get away, but a single rose vine was still wrapped around both their arms.

"Forte."

The third hit.

"A suicide attack! She'll get hit with her own magic attack in order to escape a tight situation!"

"No, that's not it. This is—"

"So that's what's going on! Cranberry has been firing her *forte* always behind Marika's back. Even if Cranberry is within range of the shot, with Marika on top of her acting as a shield, it doesn't hit her directly. So this isn't a wild, desperate attack, but a calculated move, is what you're saying?"

There was no way Marika could continue to bear being made a shield. She gritted her teeth and withstood the shock, but you could still plainly see she was in pain. The *Rosenschlange* that had captured Cranberry had now become her own shackle, keeping her from evading or defending as the third *forte* hit her undefended back. The back of her costume was torn to ribbons, the skin split open, with muscle exposed in places, too.

"Wow, that looks painful. You *are* actually taking safety precautions, right?"

"We've taken precautions, but they vary, depending on the person. With these two, it's generally fine."

Marika ripped off the final rose vine by hand and kicked at

Cranberry.

"That final vine was the only one she tore off," said Pam. "That wasn't her *Rosenschlange*."

"What do you mean?" Pammy asked.

"In other words—"

"So that's what was going on! Part of Cranberry's costume is the large roses on her shoulders and rose vines wrapped around her legs. So she used one of those rose vines, huh? She sneaked it in with Marika's *Rosenschlange* so that it wouldn't be used… And by sneaking in her own vine, she delayed the release of Marika's restraints on her by half a move…! Even watching here from the commentary seats, I didn't notice at all!"

When Marika tried to back away, Cranberry grabbed at her from below. Her long, white, graceful fingers reached out to Marika's cheek to stroke it.

"Sforzando."

Marika's head wobbled like she was spasming. Blood spurted from her eyes, ears, nose, and mouth.

"What was that move?!"

"That was a directional destructive sound wave."

"I see, I see. Being directional, it's not as powerful as *forte*, but by touching her directly, Cranberry made the sound reverberate inside her opponent's body. Seeing Marika was looking to run, Cranberry didn't miss a second taking a strike at her in retreat. Nasty, a truly nasty way to fight."

Blood gushed from every orifice in Marika's head, and she moved as if she were writhing. She kicked Cranberry in the gut, and Cranberry crossed both arms to guard herself. The pair rebounded against each other to leap backward, placing distance between themselves once more to face off. Marika spat blood onto the ground.

The camera angle switched, moving to capture Cranberry's right hand, placed on the ground. Her index and middle fingers were broken, both pointing in the wrong directions.

"Her fingers! Cranberry's fingers!"

"Ultimately, reaching out to Marika's head to use her magic entails that kind of risk. When she was going for the eye before, she combined it with *forte* and it seemed to go well, but it's not necessarily going to work out every time," Pam explained.

"What do you mean?"

"With a quick shake of her head, Marika broke her enemy's fingers with her cheekbone. The move is just like a head-butt. It's a couple beats faster than using her mouth to bite her fingers off. As a way to deal with attacks to the head such as poking out eyes, ripping the mouth, crushing the nose, et cetera…you could call this one application."

"Cranberry must have done that with the certainty that she could finish her off with that move, too… It seems Marika Fukuroi still has energy to spare."

"A normal magical girl would have vomited blood and fallen on her face."

"Right, huh? With her eardrums blasted to bits, I doubt even a fairly tough magical girl would be able to stay on her feet."

With her right eye still closed, Marika dropped into a low stance. Cranberry's torso was upright as she knelt on one knee with a hand on the ground. Both of them were still smiling.

Archfiend Pam put a hand to her own cheek. The corners of her mouth were upturned.

"This is fun, huh?" said Marika.

"Yes indeed," Cranberry agreed.

"How about we have more fun?"

"I'm blessed to have such a wonderful senior."

There was blood flowing from Marika's eyes, ears, mouth, and nose. It was doubtful she could see at all, let alone hear.

The places where Cranberry had been restrained by the *Rosenschlange* were ripped open. She was still dripping blood.

The rose cross ax on top of Marika's head rotated, digging into the ground. Cranberry rolled away to evade, and as she was getting up again, she struck the rotating ax from below with a knife hand, knocking it upward. The impact made Marika stagger, and blood spurted violently from Cranberry's hand, but she ignored it. Dropping her heel on Marika's knee, she made Marika pitch forward and stagger, and then in preparation for her next attack, Cranberry took a step forward hard enough to make the earth shudder, while at the exact same moment, Marika's rose swelled with a *pfwoo*—

"Rosenseufzer!"

Having swelled into a bulb, the rose cross ax gushed white powder, then withered all at once. Cranberry, who'd been watching out only for the rotating blade, was taken by surprise.

With powder spewed all over her face, Cranberry coughed and hacked, and as she was writhing in pain, the beads of her tears scattering, Marika leaned her body weight on Cranberry, forcing her down. She got a firm grip on her opponent's head and slammed the back of it into a rock while simultaneously smashing her own forehead into Cranberry's nose. She hit Cranberry with another head-butt for good measure, and all the while, her rose vines were slithering around Cranberry's body.

Cranberry's once-beautiful face twisted—more so than it already had been twisted by the damage taken from the attacks.

Her expression was not one of fear or pain, but one of joy.

"Fortissimo."

The screen went dark.

"Hmm?" said Pam.

"Oh," Pammy replied, "I think her magic had a wide area of attack, and the camera got hit as well. Oh dear. I was told it'd work on auto."

"It must be difficult for the cameras to evade attacks while also catching what the magical girls are doing."

"Right when things were really getting good! We can't have this. Let's switch to the aerial camera… Ohhh, there's a big crater there, like a meteorite just hit. That must be it."

"Though it seems like the both of them have disappeared…"

"Oh dear. And filming from above, the trees get in the way… Pardon me, please switch over to another camera."

Receiving that instruction from the announcer, the screen displayed different locations one after another before stopping on the fifth camera. The screen was filled with red. A blaze powerful enough to scorch the sky was burning high.

"There's a forest fire, hmm?" commented Pam.

"We've received a report," said Pammy. "That's Zone F68. A fire has broken out. It's caused by Lake of Fire Flame Flamey's

Death Flame. Five people have suffered burns.”

“I’ll send one of my wings over for first aid.”

“Do these sorts of accidents happen often?”

“No, not at all.”

The Archfiend Cram School Survival Games were held every year, and this was the first time the school had accepted nonmembers as participants. Furthermore, in order to attract as many competitors as possible, it had arranged for a cash prize of five million yen for the victor. The Department of Diplomacy had been the one to decide to accept outside participation, and it was also the sponsor putting up the prize money.

These days, the Archfiend Cram School was essentially under the jurisdiction of the Department of Diplomacy. People spoke as if it were Archfiend Pam’s private enterprise, but even back when it had just been a club, it had never been in her possession.

Though their relationship was that of teacher and students, the student was not the possession of the teacher. Just as Archfiend Pam would teach what she knew, there were things that she gained from her disciples.

Some of Archfiend Pam’s peers were cynical about having apprentices. Some said that the stronger you made your students, the more you’d decrease your own relative worth as a magical girl. Some barked that students were ultimately nothing more than guinea pigs for testing out techniques, and if you needed experimental material, you should go out to the battlefield, and you’d find any kind of magical girl there. Some would quietly speak of how just imagining shouldering responsibility for every single student was suffocating. There were any number of reasons for them not to need students.

Archfiend Pam thought differently. Precisely because a warrior was an isolated creature, it was best to have allies. It was more fun to train diligently in friendly rivalry against many peers than to work on self-improvement alone. Giving the rougher magical girls spiritual training or transmitting magical-girl combat techniques was ultimately just a pretext. That was her opinion.

Everyone getting along to become stronger. With this as her motto, Archfiend Pam had befriended magical girls who shared her views, which had led to the Archfiend Cram School’s expansion, but then it had expanded too much. The Department of Diplomacy, which Pam worked for, provided powerful backing to the school, but the upper echelons of the department were now a parent body to it, making it so that even the school's chief, Archfiend Pam, could not easily step in on the management policy of her own creation.

That was true for this matter as well. This survival exercise involved magical girls stealing flags from each other within a fixed area, and whoever gathered the most flags before the time was up was the winner—so it made a great game, and there was a fun side to it, but there was also danger involved. Violence was allowed, magic included, so of course it would be dangerous.

Those who managed this exercise were quite familiar with the combat abilities of the Archfiend Cram School people, so if it were just those people, it would be easy to draw a line and say, *"Up until this point is safe."* However, management had not listened to Archfiend Pam's insistence that accepting outside participants would take them over capacity. The department's idea was that it would draw in participants with the prize money, scout the strongest of them for the school, and then, after graduation, have them work for the department. Basically, the department planned to use the new personnel to scale up the Archfiend Cram School and expand the powers of its sponsor, the Department of Diplomacy.

Archfiend Pam was aware that she was being used by political forces. She had too much power to operate purely on her own ideas. There was no way a magical-girl weapon whose name was prefaced with the statement "capable of mass destruction" should be acting of her own accord. So she recognized her place as a tool, operating as the department ordered, restricting her own power, and fine-tuning things. This was what it meant to have a civilian body control the military.

It was much better for people smarter than she to use the power of the Archfiend than for Pam herself to wield her power arbitrarily. But even saying that, there was a minimum level she would not concede. She'd preached the dangers of the survival exercise, insisting that the department should screen the participants through interviews, at least, and had made those magical girls who did not possess the minimum level of combat skills step away. The department was taking safety more seriously than in previous years, and she'd also explained clearly to students and graduates that they were not to be reckless with the guests who were joining them. She had stationed monitors/first-aid workers in every zone. She'd also reduced the time that participants were allowed to go outside the arena boundary lines during the game from the regular thirty seconds to five seconds, and she was taking more care than usual to ensure that absolutely no damage was done to the outside.

In addition to handling announcing and commentary, Archfiend Pam also had to manage the staff at the headquarters. If a problem cropped up, she would give instructions to the monitoring staff. Or she would send a wing.

The alarm rang three times, and she switched her magical phone to talk mode.

“A combatant has caused acid rain. The cameras from that area have been damaged.”

The alarm rang three times, and she switched her magical phone to talk mode.

“Five combatants have become oxygen deficient due to Flamey’s Hellfire.”

The reports came in one after another.

“While we have some serious situations, ladies and gentlemen, there’s no need for concern,” said Pammy. “We’ve arranged it so that no matter what damage is done to the land—plants and animals included—it will go back to how it was before once the exercise is concluded. However—well, if a large fire breaks out, that does mean some participants will drop out if they get caught in it… and at that point, you have to wonder what’s the purpose of this exercise anymore, right?”

“We’ve assigned our monitoring staff and first-aid team magic fire extinguishers, and they’ve been sent to fight the fire. I’ve also sent one of my wings. We’ll have the fire put out in quick order… probably.”

“Reports from the scene indicate that some combatants are helping fight the fire. That’s heartwarming to hear.”

“I’m thankful.”

While she was giving instructions and commentary, Archfiend Pam let her thoughts turn to that fight.

Had the battle between Cranberry and Marika reached a conclusion? Or were they still going? Sunset was soon, so that might put Marika at a disadvantage. But Marika knew herself. If there was no sun, she would probably bloom a flower that didn’t need sunlight to fight. Just how would Cranberry respond to that? Pam had assumed the Magical Girl Resources Department had distanced itself from active combat, but Cranberry's display just now had been quite splendid. There hadn't been even the slightest hint of decline in her technique or readiness for battle. She must have continued training diligently, even after having begun working in Magical Girl Resources. Even if Cranberry had been a student only for a short time, she had quite perfectly inherited the ethos of the Archfiend Cram School.

"Whoa there, the alarm's going off again," said Pammy. "What's happened this time?"

"This is..."

"It seems three individuals have been injured from getting caught in the fight between Cranberry and Marika Fukuroi. One with broken bones. I'm told they're requesting emergency support... Pam, a wing to act as relief personnel."

"...I'll send one."

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For the survival exercise that year, the department had reserved a national park of a certain nation for its exclusive use. It was a vast stretch of land. The department had promised the area would be completely restored via magic once everything was over, but just how many of the participants understood what a blatant show of the Department of Diplomacy's power this was, negotiating with a nation and getting its agreement for such a huge contract?

I understood it. I would never have accepted this job if I hadn't understood just what it meant to stir up trouble with a target this powerful. No matter how generous the reward is, in the end, your own skin is the most important thing. No prize is worth it if you're dead.

The assassination of Archfiend Pam.

I knew how strong Archfiend Pam was. I'd memorized her chief accomplishments, and I'd also gotten to see those fights of hers that have been recorded. Her four wings were incredible in every aspect: universality, durability, and destructive force. No magical girl in existence could challenge her in a straight fight and win. Even if Archfiend Pam were to wind up in a fight against all other magical girls, she might just win. I figured she would.

That was what I was going to be killing. It was a formidable job. It would go down in magical-girl history. But my name would not. The names of JFK and Oswald are spoken of as a set because Oswald got caught. Even if the assassination succeeds, if the assassin gets caught, that means they blew it.

I'm a professional. A professional doesn't blow it.

I was going to kill Archfiend Pam, and then I was going to make it home alive. My client had laid enough preparations for me to get back alive. And besides, if anything, I'm actually better at running than killing. I'm not so self-sacrificing that I'd lay down my own life to complete the task, and I was under no obligation to go that far, either. I'd accepted the money, so I'd do what that money was worth. No matter how much you get paid, it's not worth it to die for it. I'm a career assassin, not a suicide bomber.

The way you live is more important than the way you die. That's priority number one. It's not like I want to pass away quietly in bed without anyone knowing about it. I don't want commendation or recognition. I don't want my name going down in history, either. But a difficult job is worth doing. I'd gone through training and more training, plus lots of real combat, in order to perform a task that not just anyone can manage—something only I could accomplish.

So far, the plan had been a success. Archfiend Pam was within arm's reach. The problem was her wings. If I could just get her wings gone, I could kill her with my abilities. There were so many people participating in the exercise that year, Archfiend Pam wouldn't be able to just sit around. She'd use her wings. And she actually had just sent some to fight the fire and treat the injured. Somewhere along the line, the perfect moment would come when her wings were gone. That was what I was gunning for.

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"This is a dizzying amount of action, huh?" said Pammy. "Does the middle stage of the games always turn out like this?"

"It's unusual to have this much going on," Pam replied.

"Are the outside participants having an effect on things after all? Even as a professional commentator, I can barely keep track of it all. Battles are breaking out all over the place."

The guests' brave fights were drawing attention.

Some of the monitoring staff wore serious expressions as they whispered to one another things like, "The Archfiend Cram School has declined," and "If outside participants win the moment the school starts accepting them, it'll be humiliated."

As Pam crossed out with double red lines the names of those on the register who had dropped out of the running, she found it was true that a lot of the guests were still in the game. Since figures connected to the Archfiend Cram School had names like "Cranberry, Musician of the Forest" and "Lake of Fire Flame Flamey" to awe their enemies, and also with an eye to the importance of image management, a lot of the names were longer than those of regular magical girls, and you could find them at a glance on the register.

The announcer was looking for the names of those who were earning the most flags, but it wasn't going well, and when Archfiend Pam took over operation of the announcer's magical phone it made a strange noise, so she was forced to request that Cranberry's mascot, who was on standby on the headquarters desk, search for her. The magical phones of the participants were piled up in a mountain on top of the desk, and in one of them the mascot Fav was bobbing about in his hologram, repeatedly complaining and griping, and the majority of his complaints were now turning toward the announcer and commentator. Pam was just about at the limit of her ability to ignore him. He kept going on like he wanted them to hear, saying things like, "*Archfiend*, pon? Psh. What an arrogant title." "Both announcer and commentator being all in black is totally lacking in class, pon. Mixing in half white like Fav is cooler, pon." "I've never heard of a magical girl called Pammy, pon. If you're gonna have an announcer, bring in someone more relevant, pon." "Agh, you're too loud, pon. Be quieter with your little make-believe commentary, pon."

It made her think that maybe having him do some work would shut him up.

"Agh, why does Fav have to be your slave, pon?"

"Oh yes, I'm very sorry for making such an impertinent request," said Pammy. "I just heard that the digital fairy–type mascot characters are proficient when it comes to electronics. Right, Pam?"

"Well, basically."

"Cranberry said she joined in because it would be good reference for her exams, but then she left Fav behind, and Fav isn't happy about this at all, pon. Fav's got nothing to do, pon. It's boring, pon. In the first place, if you're calling this *survival,* then you should introduce more exciting, hardcore rules, pon. This game is too soft, pon."

The black-and-white digital fairy continued grumbling away. To him (or her?), participation in this exercise at all was apparently cause for complaint. Archfiend Pam felt bad about it, but she couldn't have him continue to get in the way. She would wind up having to do major edits in order to produce the Blu-rays.

Fav must not think well of the Department of Diplomacy or the Archfiend Cram School.

Fav worked for the Magical Girl Resources Department, which wasn't fond of fighting, and it thought contemptuously of the Department of Diplomacy's methods, with its reputation of making use of force to get its way, and called it barbaric, anti-intellectual, and antiquated. The cyber fairies in particular, being a crystallization of the best of technology and intellect, had to see a world where violence spoke loudest as beyond out of the question. Pam could understand his desire to make a complaint or two.

When she got Fav's cooperation, she had the digital fairy shift the camera to the highest point scorer. There, in addition to the combatant that she was looking for, was one other magical girl. One combatant had rabbit ears paired with traditional Japanese-style clothes: Hana Gekokujou. The other participant wasn't a member of the Archfiend Cram School, but she was known to it. She had the motif of a beautician. Her name was Styler Mimi.

"According to what it says here," Pammy said, "Styler Mimi quite often works together with Marika Fukuroi, the one who was giving us that wild and violent show just now. Her style coordination magic makes it possible for unusual-looking magical girls to look just like ordinary people out in town, and the Archfiend Cram School sometimes has her help out with its activities as well, huh?"

"She's helped us a lot."

"And this bunny-eared magical girl…Hana Gekokujou. That's a very strange name."

Styler Mimi's expression was hard, her eyes harsh. The cold look she had fixed on her enemy would make a timid magical girl do an about-face, while if you were like Marika, you'd be pleased and go, *"Ohhh."* The air about her, like a sharp, naked blade, was her usual.

Hana Gekokujou looked right back at her, straight in the eye, unflinchingly, at the ready in a relaxed, natural position. You could get a sense of her combat experience and the confidence that lay behind it. You couldn't sense any eagerness to fight in her, either. Her gaudy appearance belied the impression she gave of being a veteran magical girl.

"She's not from the Archfiend Cram School, huh? It says she currently holds the most flags—how do you see her, Pam?"

"She seems quite strong, from what I can see."

"Right then, so about Hana Gekokujou. She's apparently a member of the Inspection Department—a new ace who's distinguished herself only recently. Are you aware of this, Pam?"

"We've even been hearing the rumors that she's the new ace of the Inspection Department at the Department of Diplomacy."

"Sounds like we can expect a lot from her!"

The Department of Diplomacy and the Inspection Department had built up something of a relationship. Perhaps because it would be unbearable to have conflict with Inspection and get reported for all sorts of things, true or false, you could say Inspection was the one department that Diplomacy was on good terms with. They were friendly enough for it to be like, *"We've got an event coming up. And we're scouting for participants now." "Then maybe we'll send some people over. There's some lively newbies lately, you know."*

"And they're glaring at each other now!" said Pammy.

"There they go."

Mimi broke into motion. She closed a couple dozen feet in a single bound, wielding three razors sandwiched between the fingers of her right hand. Their sharp trajectories sliced through the spot where Hana was, but Hana had already moved from that spot.

"She's fast! Even the cameras moving via magic motion detectors can barely keep up!"

"She's not just fast. She's used to fighting opponents wielding blades."

Hana threw a kick at Mimi from behind, and as Mimi turned to face her, she struck back with large hairstyling scissors. But before those blades could land, Hana drew back her leg, backing away to kick up earth to blind her opponent. Mimi dodged the spray as she tried to circle around to the right, but Hana was already out of range of a follow-up attack.

“Her moves are frighteningly fast,” said Pam. “And I would say they’re logical, too.”

“She’s staying cautious of Styler Mimi’s weapons, keeping a certain distance away as she fights. She doesn’t move like she enjoys exchanging punches and kicks, but like her goal is to swiftly silence and secure an enemy. That makes her a type you don’t see much of in the Archfiend Cram School, it being a gathering of combat addicts.”

“I wouldn’t say it’s a gathering of combat a—”

“But it’s correct to say you don’t see her type much in the school, right?”

“Well…yes.”

“I might assume she acquired this way of fighting due to the nature of her work. The employees of Inspection work to manage crime. And the enforcement team of which Hana Gekokujou is a member could be called a symbol of that. For them, the priority is to apprehend the enemy before them—anything but successful capture of the enemy, even if it takes foul or unfair means, is unacceptable. Letting the enemy get away will lead to further crime —a situation that must be avoided at all costs.”

Mimi quietly clicked her tongue. With her scissors and razors at the ready, she circled in a fan around the enemy. This put a large tree between them, where Mimi disappeared—or so it must have appeared to Hana Gekokujou.

“She disappeared?! Styler Mimi completely disappeared behind that tree! Just where did she…?”

“She can use her magic to apply flawless style coordination to herself.”

“You mean that she specializes not only in fashion for city life, but also in camouflage for outdoor activities…? But camouflage…

camouflage…? Isn't this more than camouflage?"

"Well, it's magic."

"I see, magic… So this is a visually undetectable method of concealment, virtually making herself transparent. Then you'd need unique senses in order to not be deceived by it. Like hearing sharp enough to pick up on the sound of a heartbeat, or the ability to sense body heat, or a magic that could visualize life energy."

"That's right."

"Okay then, so now we'll set the cameras to infrared mode. Oh, Mimi *is* there."

Following the instructions of the announcer, the camera changed modes. Having camouflaged herself, Styler Mimi was passing in front of the thicket, circling wide to head toward Hana.

"She's keeping her stance low, since her camouflage is patterned after the thicket, huh?" said Pammy. "Staying low while also paying attention to Hana Gekokujou's angle of view, she's moving to keep the thicket at her back at all times."

"She moves like an expert with mastery of her magic."

Slowly, with featherlight steps, Styler Mimi moved along the thick roots of a tree. She made no such blunders as snapping branches underfoot or leaving footprints on the ground as she steadily closed the distance between herself and the enemy. Once Mimi was a little over a foot behind Hana, with her razors raised over her head, Hana moved. While turning, she took a step directly toward the invisible Mimi and kicked low. Mimi, with her weapons raised overhead, couldn't react in time, and she took the kick to the ankle, her expression turning to one of anguish as a cry slipped from deep in her throat.

"She read her move! She totally figured out where Hana Gekokujou was, and what her attack would be!"

"It seems like…"

"According to my documents here, her magic is to sharpen senses. She must have strengthened senses like hearing or smell to avoid being deceived by the camouflage, just like those examples we brought up before."

"Mm-hmm."

"That low kick was also frighteningly powerful."

"No, I don't think it was strength… She's probably using her magic for that, too."

It had looked like a very light low kick. But Mimi had reacted like she'd taken a heavy blow.

Hana kicked low again, and this time Mimi somehow blocked it with her shin. But Mimi was still clenching her teeth in pain. Looking like she was ready to fall to her knees, she backstepped, but Hana wouldn't let her get away. She came forward, keeping within range as she moved to finish Mimi off. Low kick, low kick, and then right after focusing on the low range, she went for the middle. Mimi just barely managed to handle the combo, blocking with her knee, then arm, and each time she looked as if she was in more pain than the damage merited.

"Gekokujou's magic is to sharpen the senses," said Pam. "Does her magic only work on herself?"

"What do you mean?" Pammy asked.

"If her magic can be used on others as well, then Mimi's reactions would make sense. Hana's swift, sharp attacks are specialized to connect and aren't aiming to do damage. It's only to connect. When her hits land, she sharpens her opponent's sense of pain to make them feel agony."

"Sharpening her opponent's sense of pain… She can even do that?"

"It seems her magic has broader applications than you might think."

Mimi scattered razor blades ahead of her. The razor blades danced in the air between the girls, flashing under the light of the moon and stars, and before they even hit the ground, Mimi was racing off in the opposite direction. After the blades fell, Hana finally gave chase.

"Gekokujou moves quickly and with fine control," Pammy said. "It's incredibly difficult to avoid her attacks, made purely with the intention of connecting, huh? The right answer might be just to not let her attack in the first place. By tossing out a whole bunch of razor blades to fill the area, Styler Mimi obstructed her opponent's movement."

"If she fills the area with blades, then her opponent can't follow. It buys her time and distance."

"Time and distance?"

"It looks like Gekokujou can't use her magic from any distance. The area of effect is somewhat limited. In that exchange of blows just now, Mimi must also have figured that out."

Mimi pulled out glass bottles with both hands, spraying the contents at the enemy hot on her heels. They were perfume bottles.

"To put a scent on her?" Pammy mused. "Or no, does she mean to keep her from smelling?"

"Perhaps she thought the reason her magic camouflage didn't work was her opponent's sense of smell."

"Doing that makes you wonder a bit, huh? Why did she see smell as special? Hana Gekokujou has those ears, so wouldn't you naturally assume hearing?"

"It's true she does appear that way…"

Mimi raced into the thicket, simultaneously using her style coordination magic for camouflage to disappear into the underbrush. Hana chased straight after her. Her rabbit ears made all sorts of subtle twitches, indicating just how she was grasping the enemy's position.

"She can't escape," said Pam. "Running in a thicket, she'll inevitably make noise."

"So that means it'll be easy to pursue her, huh? It looks like Hana Gekokujou is gradually catching up."

While getting closer and closer to her target, Hana passed by a tree, but then right as she was jumping over a boulder, her expression distorted in shock.

Behind the boulder, seven hairstyling scissors had been thrust into the ground, blades pointed up.

“A trap! She laid a trap with scissors!” cried Pammy.

“She’s good,” Pam commented.

Hana twisted her body in the air, pulling a kimono sash string out from her sleeve pocket to hook it beyond the boulder, then using the stretched-taut sash as footing for a second bound. All the while, she never took her attention off the enemy. When three razor blades whizzed toward her, she caught them between the fingers of both hands, landing soundlessly to resume her pursuit.

Sweat beaded on Hana’s forehead. It seemed she hadn’t anticipated that the enemy would lay a trap as she was fleeing under cloak of invisibility.

“Hana Gekokujou has wonderfully evaded the trap!” Pammy cried.

“Gekokujou is the type who excels more in speed than physical strength. Even if she’s not completely hobbled, injury would halve her fighting abilities, or perhaps worse.”

“That was a close one, huh?”

“I understand what Mimi was doing now. She was making sure that she wouldn’t be detected by smell.”

“What do you mean, making sure?”

“Gekokujou saw through her camouflage and also was able to make Mimi suffer a sharp pain that would normally have been impossible. From those two things, she figured Gekokujou’s magic might be to strengthen any sense, and based on that, she sprayed perfume on her to create a situation where she would be unable to rely on her sense of smell.”

“I see! If Hana Gekokujou were only using her hearing, she wouldn’t have been able to detect that trap. But with smell, she might have been able to get a whiff of metal and notice that the trap was there.”

“But she made it through the trap. Now this is going to get tough for Mimi.”

Rushing through the thicket, Mimi came out into an open area. There, Hana took a step to the side before chasing her further.

“Wasn’t that an odd move for Hana Gekokujou to make?”

"She was avoiding a tree."

"A tree? It looked as if she took a step sideways in a place where there was nothing, though."

"As Mimi was moving on, she used her style coordination on a tree to camouflage it."

"You mean there was a tree ahead of Hana Gekokujou that had been camouflaged? And if she had kept running straight ahead, she'd have crashed into it? So she can even put makeup on a tree, huh?"

"Her magic can be applied to any living thing."

"I see! Impressive that Hana Gekokujou could avoid it, though."

"Since there was that trap earlier, she's more cautious than before. It was probably from reflected sound… I couldn't say for sure, but she must have used some sense to avoid it."

The traps Mimi had painstakingly laid had been useful only in slightly rattling her opponent's composure. Archfiend Pam was certain. Hana Gekokujou was strong. It was fair to say the Inspection Department had been correct in its assessment and in sending her to this exercise. She achieved a high level in all areas: physical abilities, combat experience, levelheadedness, and powerful magic.

The cameras moved onward to follow the two magical girls. They lost track of Mimi once but found her again in under a minute. She was in a ready stance, facing her pursuer, just barely in front of the red line that indicated that beyond was out of bounds. If you went past that line for five seconds, you were instantly disqualified, all flags forfeit.

"Styler Mimi has been backed into a corner!"

"She can't run any farther."

"Just like a rabbit chased by a fox, she's been cornered at the edge of a cliff with no place to run! But this time, the rabbit is the one doing the chasing!"

Mimi charged at Hana, simultaneously throwing razors and scissors. Though Hana dodged or knocked aside all the blades, somehow Mimi managed to swap their positions. The two of them ran by the line, repeatedly attacking and dodging all the while as they kept racing at full sprint. While passing by, Mimi flung out a kick, which was turned aside, then threw scissors, which Hana calmly dodged. Hands never stopping, Mimi scattered blades, sprinkling dye powder like a smoke screen. She used whatever special items she had on hand to just keep her opponent from getting close, but Hana avoided and dodged all of them, making use of swift footwork as she moved.

As their fight at the edge of the boundary continued, they moved down another five hundred yards before switching back to return the other way. Swiping with blades, kicking, swinging out with fists, and returning to their original position, Mimi moved away from the line. There, backing up toward the forest, she raised her scissors and razors and came to a stop.

With the line at her back, Hana lowered her stance. Now Hana would probably try to make her approach. But before Hana could make her move, Mimi tossed away her weapons and spread both palms, raising them to eye level.

Hana narrowed her eyes, retreating with a hop backward. Nothing of her expression or movements showed any carelessness. At the ready a half step in front of the boundary line, she examined Mimi.

Mimi's hands remained spread as she addressed Hana. "If…I were to propose…that I yield half my flags to you…what would you do?"

"Surrender… So she's given up, huh? True, looking at their fight this far…it seems like it's rather unlikely Mimi would win."

"Hmm."

"Well, but…this is surprising. So making an offer of negotiation is also an option, huh?"

"It is."

"If you stay in the game, you've still got a chance, while if you're knocked out, you don't. Can we take this to mean that from where Styler Mimi stands, getting through this with just a loss of flags is better than dropping out of the running?"

"That's right."

"While from how Hana Gekokujou sees it, even if she beats Styler Mimi, when she resists in a final struggle, Hana might be injured. Since this survival exercise is a long game, being injured in the initial stages is equivalent to defeat—so there is actually merit to this, for either party. Though it's not all that exciting for the recording."

"Momentary victories are important, but the number one thing is being able to continue until the end. Being aware to act to avoid injury is also vital in this survival exercise."

"Cranberry and Marika Fukuroi were going hard at it right from the start, though—what about that?"

"Those two are unique cases. They're really not to be emulated."

The corners of Hana's lips tilted upward slightly. She seemed to understand her opponent's intentions. Her stance relaxed, and she shrugged. "If you're giving them over anyway, I think it would be the better deal if I took all of them."

"Oh, I see. Well, I won't be yielding any flags."

The smile disappeared from Hana's face, and she gave Mimi a questioning look. Mimi clapped her open palms together and muttered, "Since now I'll be undoing the magic."

Hana's expression turned from questioning to shocked. The boundary line had changed position. The line that was supposed to have been half a step behind Hana was now positioned one and a half yards in front of her. In other words, Hana was now standing out-of-bounds.

"What's going on?! The position of the line has changed!"

"Ahh…she got Gekokujou."

"What do you mean?"

"Styler Mimi changes appearances with her style coordination magic. Her ability isn't limited to humans or magical girls. She can use her magic to change the appearance of anything, whether it be trees, flowers…or grass with a line drawn on it."

"I get it! So she erased the original line, then disguised the fake line as the real one, huh? And her fake line was farther outside the boundary than the real line…so Hana Gekokujou never realized she'd gone out-of-bounds."

"Using a trap that she'd laid beforehand, she gained some distance from Gekokujou during the chase, while in the meantime, she used her style coordination on the boundary line to change where it was drawn."

"And that final surrender was all part of the plan, too, huh? In a magical-girl battle, five seconds is a long, long time, basically an eternity—so by making her opponent move to just the right spot before making that offer of negotiation, she earned that five valuable seconds."

Styler Mimi snorted smugly and looked at Hana. Pam wouldn't say it was necessarily due to Marika's influence, but Mimi never acted modestly toward people she'd only just met. She would be arrogant, as if to say, *"I'm the stronger one, so I'm more important."* Archfiend Pam did think that if she were to lose brutally to someone, she might actually turn meek, but Mimi had gotten this far without ever knowing such a bitter loss. She was just that strong.

Hana's expression turned from shocked to *"Oh, too bad,"* as her rabbit ears drooped, scratching her head. "Well…you got me. Oh, this has been educational." And she bowed her head courteously.

Mimi said, "Oh, no…thank you very much," her manner not at all sounding sincere, then turned away and raced off.

She did display minimal politeness, despite her arrogance, so in that sense, she was somewhat more sociable than Marika.

"That was a fairly painful move for Mimi as well," said Pam.

"Was it? It looked as if she pulled it off wonderfully, though."

"When a competitor drops out due to going out-of-bounds, they have their flags confiscated."

"So even though Styler Mimi was effectively the one to force Hana Gekokujou to drop out, by the rules, she disqualified herself… and even if Styler Mimi won their exchange, she won't get any flags."

"Mm-hmm."

"After all that effort, not getting any flags out of it… Hmm, it doesn't seem very efficient. And it's even worse when Hana Gekokujou had gathered enough flags to be vying for the top spot, huh? Ohhh, that's tough. I can't help but get the feeling, watching Styler Mimi race off, that you can sense more frustration than joy at having defeated a tough enemy."

The camera zoomed in on Hana Gekokujou, who remained behind. After having the rug pulled out from under her by the prey she'd been one step away from cornering, and withdrawing because of the rules, she looked mysteriously refreshed. She was muttering something under her breath as she swung her right index finger right, left, up, and down, walking away from the area.

She must have been looking back on her fight with Mimi and everything leading up to it—considering what she'd done and if it had been the best, or if maybe there'd been a better way. She was like a skilled old battle veteran, but this side of her was fresh like a young fighter.

Watching her, Archfiend Pam thought that was the one area where she had room to grow.

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Archfiend Pam was right there in front of me. She was commentating with a self-satisfied expression. If I just reached out a hand, I could touch her.

But not yet. My opportunity, the moment for me to make my move, was not right now. I'm good at waiting. I once lay in wait for three days underneath wet fallen leaves without moving a single muscle. You needed to be tough for that job. And I needed to be even tougher for this job now.

Two of Archfiend Pam's wings had flown away. They hadn't come back. Those wings are the source of her power. As long as she has those, she can wield her power as "the magical girl capable of mass destruction." I wouldn't say she's weak without them. She's an incredibly strong magical girl regardless.

I'm a pro. I don't let my guard down. I don't get prideful. But I don't get scared, either. I get an accurate grasp of the enemy's strength as well as my own, then go for it at a moment when I can win.

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A few hours had passed since sunset. The voices of insects, the sounds of the wind, the screams of magical girls, and the sounds of destruction rang out here and there. The exercise had passed the halfway point and was moving into the latter stage. The number of participants had been shaved down to one-quarter, and the flags had been gathered in a handful of places. Since one person could carry many flags, if one girl beat another, it wasn't unusual for her to shoot to the top of the ranking.

"According to the data from previous years," said Pammy, "this is the point where fights tend to become more intense. And it says this is when the type of magical girl who lies in wait until the last moment, then joins in the fight once the flags have been gathered up, will go on the move… Would you call that, say, hyena-like?"

"Well, that's not untrue."

"So then, actually…in your view, Archfiend Pam, would you want them to avoid choosing such…how should I put it…crafty methods, let's say?"

"I couldn't blame them for optimizing their behavior, within what the rules allow, in order to achieve victory."

"But still, it's an exercise, at the end of the day, right? Isn't this exercise nominally supposed to be held to uncover your own problem points and used as material for self-improvement? It's an educational event, right? Then the problem becomes, just how much of that can they accomplish when they have that unwavering fixation on efficiency in their strategy?"

"Well, I suppose."

Archfiend Pam had in fact given strict orders to the Archfiend Cram School people to avoid bringing shame to the school in their fights. But since she didn't have the right to give orders to the guests, she wasn't going to force on them a tacit acknowledgment of unwritten rules. So if they did lie in ambush until the final stage, that was all up to them.

"So then does that mean you want them to fight directly, head-to-head, after all?" Pammy asked her. "And you're not a fan of making teams to fight, either, right?"

"Well, there's no problem with forming teams, either. Combining the magic of multiple magical girls can give you tens, hundreds, thousands of times more power."

"Ohhh, you're just talking about making teams, huh? So then, in other words, things aside from forming teams could pose a problem?”

“…No comment.”

The screen switched over to show a magical girl kicking down trees to make her way forward.

“Oh!” cried Archfiend Pam.

“Is she from the Archfiend Cram School?”

“No, she’s not.”

“But from your reaction just now, it seems like you know her.”

“She works for the Department of Diplomacy.”

“Ohhh, I see, so she’s a colleague.”

“…Yes. She’s a colleague.”

After wondering about how to explain her relationship with Lady Proud, Pam settled on “colleague.” But she was actually less a colleague and more a friend. Or at least Pam thought so.

There were few people equal to Archfiend Pam. Everyone at the Archfiend Cram School was her student, so she didn’t have a relationship of equals with any of them. Even at the department—since it had started prioritizing graduates of the school for hires, it had wound up being nothing but Pam’s own students, so there were no equal relationships there, either.

There was no longer anyone the same age as Pam who was still in the magical-girl business. Never mind the same age—there weren’t even any five years younger. It was no wonder Marika Fukuroi treated her like an old woman.

But despite how things were at the Department of Diplomacy, it wasn’t as if every single person there was from the Archfiend Cram School, and if they were not from the school, then she would be able to associate with them as an equal.

“According to the documents I have here,” said Pammy, “her name is Lady Proud. Her magic can change her own blood to any liquid she chooses. She works as a unit leader at the Department of Diplomacy, and she also comes with a guarantee from Archfiend Pam that she’s good at her job. She not only excels in combat, but her ability to coordinate others when in the role of unit leader is unbeatable, compared with those magical girls who devote themselves entirely to fighting. That’s a compliment, huh? Just what you’d expect from the Department of Diplomacy! You might call it the north pole of talent, where the top elites gather!"

"It's not really a gathering of only the top elites."

"And right now, she carries…one flag?"

"One? That's odd."

"Maybe the count's been done wrong."

"There's no way it could be wrong, pon," Fav cut in.

"Oh, I'm sorry. Um, it seems it's not wrong," Pammy corrected herself. "So then what does this mean? Does this mean Lady Proud has only just started to make her move? Like that hyena sort of thing?"

"No, she, of all people, would never do that."

Archfiend Pam knew the way Lady Proud conducted herself.

Once, the two of them had traveled together to do a preliminary inspection for a job training trip. After riding a civilian bus to go to the dojo they'd be looking over, they had stayed over one night. They'd shared alcoholic drinks made from Lady Proud's blood and exchanged opinions about the state of the department as well as their lives as magical girls. Pam had thought Lady Proud was normally tight-lipped and rigidly overserious, but when she got drunk—since the alcohol made from her blood was magical in nature, it would work on magical girls, who would normally nullify poison—her lips got surprisingly loose, her cheeks going pink as she voiced her complaints about and dissatisfactions with the Department of Diplomacy. On top of that, she'd also declared that she would one day conquer Archfiend Pam and stand at the top of the department. Right in front of Archfiend Pam's eyes. Never before had there been a single magical girl like this.

Even now, Archfiend Pam would think back on that from time to time. That had been fun. It might have been the first time since the field trips of her student days that she'd enjoyed traveling.

The next day, Lady Proud had returned to her usual polite attitude. Her being able to cleanly switch on and off to conduct herself the way a magical girl should made Archfiend Pam feel even more favorably about her.

That day, Lady Proud was off her game, but she was the embodiment of *on*. She strode through the forest with a dignified posture. She stepped on a stump and broke it. She kicked a boulder, shattering it. She tore up thick roots that ran deep and tangled. If a large tree got in her way, she punched it down with a swing of her arm. She did away with all obstacles.

It looked as if she was making quite a lot of noise as she made her way along. Participants tried to avoid standing out in this survival exercise. It would alert enemies and draw them to their position. Enemies persistently tracking her who knew where she was while she didn't know their positions would produce immeasurable strain, even for a hardy warrior.

"Enemies here!" said Pammy.

"There's a lot of them, hmm?" Pam commented.

As expected, their attacks focused on Lady Proud.

The magical girls who were hiding behind trees in an attempt to ambush Lady Proud were kicked down as they waited for her to go by, trees and all, while the magical girls covered in tree leaves who leaped down on her from the branches above were struck back in the air—one with a double kick, one with punches, another with kicks, yet another with throws. Lady Proud acted as if the difference in numbers was nothing.

When a destructive light beam was fired at her from behind, she evaded it with a shake of her head, hopping back with her eyes locked forward to fire a back kick that followed through the solar plexus of the enemy and knocked her out with one strike. Grabbing the lasso thrown toward her, Lady Proud pulled, yanking its owner toward her to strike the heel of her palm into her assailant's jaw and knock her out. And when needles that could hardly even be seen were spat at her, with a sweep of a tree that she'd ripped out of the ground, she blocked them all, letting the momentum of her spin take her around to toss the tree at the enemy and knock her away.

At just about the same moment Lady Proud threw that tree, the sounds of an engine and things being sliced apart and something being crushed into the ground approached from behind, and Lady Proud turned around to stop the oncoming vehicle. Her palms split open, blood spurting out. It was a miniature tank armed with countless blades, like a chariot used in ancient Rome. A magical girl with a gardener motif rode atop it, holding down levers as she laughed madly. Lady Proud was slowly being pushed back by the tank's advance, her feet leaving ruts in the earth. Since she was holding back the rotating blades with her bare hands, the wounds were pulled open farther, and she was bleeding a considerable amount.

Lady Proud held back the miniature tank as it pulled in tree roots, earth, rocks, and everything, slicing and crunching them to scatter dust and shreds of foliage and push forward, but she was being overpowered.

“Umm, according to the records I have here, that’s not someone from the Archfiend Cram School. Mina Acre, a.k.a. Madgardener. It says she uses a speedy magic killer lawn mower.”

“Ahh, so that’s a lawn mower.”

“Normally, she’s gentle and reserved, but when she gets on her lawn mower, she gets carried away by a powerful impulse to destroy, and will fight on and on like a berserker… Should she be allowed to participate?”

“Well, she seemed gentle in the interview…”

Mina’s shrill laughter rang out through the late-night forest and then eventually began to fade. Mina, caught up in her frenzy, was quieting down, as was the lawn mower she drove. Mina kept shoving the levers down over and over, but the lawn mower was grinding to a halt.

“It’s not moving! For some reason, Mina’s lawn mower has stopped working!”

“Look. The wheels and rotating blades.”

A cloudy, white, hardened substance was jamming up the wheels and rotating blades of the lawn mower.

“What *is* that…?” asked Pammy.

“That’s adhesive. The principal ingredient is probably a type of epoxy. It’s a mixture of two fluids, with some other hardening agent mixed in it as well.”

“So then, you mean…”

“Lady Proud’s palms were torn open, and her blood gushed out onto the wheels and rotating blades. It seems she transformed that blood into a powerful adhesive.”

“Kind of doesn’t seem like it’ll move anymore, huh?”

With a high-pitched shriek, Mina pushed at the levers. But the lawn mower wouldn't move. There was a nasty creaking sound as black smoke rose from the vehicle. Bluish-black blood vessels rose up in Lady Proud's arms. Mina's shrill yell turned into a wail. The killer lawn mower was rising off the ground.

Lady Proud flung her upper body backward, going into a bridge pose. She threw the lawn mower like she was doing a suplex, tossing rider and all behind her. The lawn mower flew away, breaking trees as it went, disappearing along with Mina's shriek into the darkness.

"Even the killer lawn mower is no problem for her! She's strong! Lady Proud is strong!"

The magical girl who appeared as if swapping out with the killer lawn mower was different from the foes who had come before her.

There was no affectation or eagerness to fight in her manner as she approached like she was going for a stroll in the forest. Her whole body was covered in a costume with a metallic luster, and she had a sort of atmosphere to her. If someone with an eye for it were to see her, they'd grasp it with an *"Ahh"*—she had just that sort of air.

"And here comes a new foe. She's apparently also not affiliated with the Archfiend Cram School. Um, her name is Metallie. She holds twenty-eight flags."

"…She's strong."

Metallie didn't stop walking, maintaining a fixed pace as she strode ahead over trees, grass, rocks, and the magical girls who'd been defeated by Lady Proud. Lady Proud was standing still. The bleeding from her palms had already stopped.

Though she must have been fighting continuously, Lady Proud showed no signs of exhaustion. The breaths coming from her nose were always uniform and calm. You could even detect a quiet excitement in her breathing. Water vapor rose from her body, wreathing her in a ghostly atmosphere. It was an unbecoming amount of sweat for a magical girl.

With her hair in disarray, she'd become like a monstrous hag in a fairy tale. The accessory that was her symbol, the garlic hair decoration, had been knocked askew in the fight. Her fangs occasionally flashed from her mouth, and when they did, words slipped from her lips. "For a magical girl, feeling is everything…"

Archfiend Pam nodded. Things were coming along quite nicely.

"Lady Proud seems a little odd…doesn't she?" said Pammy.

"This is her secret move. She only uses it when facing a powerful opponent."

"What do you mean, secret move?"

"Lady Proud can turn her own blood into the fluid of her choice. Using this magic, her nerves—"

"Ohhh, I see! So by exercising full control over neurotransmitters and intracerebral narcotics, she pushes her combat skills beyond her limits. And that offers her many benefits, such as dulling pain, sharpening her senses, and muscle strength, huh? Oh yeah, her palms have stopped bleeding—so was that also from manipulating the components of her blood, then?"

Each magical girl understood the other's capacity. The one with the metallic luster—Metallie—created a hammer from her right hand and a javelin from her left. Lady Proud noticed this and leaped into the air.

With a midair turn, she reversed her body to face the other way and leaped to the thickest of the nearby branches, using it as a foothold to pounce on the enemy. She tangled her cape around the javelin that was thrust toward her, diverting its momentum as she kicked her opponent, but her leg was blocked by a large shield.

"It says that Metallie's magic is to create metal items from inside her body."

"She constitutes them with exceptional speed. She's fast."

Lady Proud landed, cape fluttering up. Strapped underneath it were rows of test tubes, all of them filled with Lady Proud's blood.

"She can turn her blood into any sort of dangerous liquid, huh…? Gasoline, nitroglycerin, liquid nitrogen, lava, synthetic opioids, isopropyl methane fluorophosphonate. But, well, I dunno, is all that going to be all right?"

"All the safety precautions are in place."

Lady Proud plucked three test tubes in her fingers and scattered their contents. The red of her blood faded in the air, instantly turning white.

"That's magic liquid nitrogen," said Pam. "If it touches her, it will be worse than frostbite."

"So what will Metallie do?!"

Metallie did not try to dodge the attack from the fluid, which would be difficult to avoid, charging straight forward instead. As she moved, she changed the shape of her body—rather, she created a thick knight's armor from her whole body, purging it the instant the liquid nitrogen touched her to leave what was inside completely safe and come within a half step of Lady Proud. This close, never mind throwing the test tubes, she wouldn't even have the time to pull them out.

Lady Proud swiped out with her nails, and Metallie brought out a long metal skewer to block them, piercing Lady Proud's hand through from the palm to the back.

"Oooooowie! That looks like it hurts!"

"Pain aside, it will inhibit her movement."

Metallie followed up that attack with a fist that gradually increased in size, and by the time it reached Lady Proud, her knuckles were covered in brass. Lady Proud repelled the short hook aimed at her side and then turned aside the strike that came toward her chest as she broke off the skewer through her palm by clenching her right hand—Metallie flowed right into a combo with a strike at her cheek next, and in response, Lady Proud opened her mouth wide.

Lady Proud's fangs crunched down on the approaching brass knuckles as if they felt no resistance at all. Metallie was already withdrawing her fist. All that had been shattered in Lady Proud's teeth was the brass knuckles. She spat the metal chunks back out at her enemy, which Metallie swiped aside with the back of her right hand with a yell. Metallie didn't miss a beat, slicing at her opponent with a longsword while she simultaneously threw a knife, but Lady Proud repelled both. Metallie somersaulted backward, scattering something in midair. Those things rolled over the ground, pointing their sharp spikes in every direction.

"Caltrops, hmm?" said Pam. "There are even barbs on the ends of the points."

"Lady Proud has raised a foot over the caltrops! She's going to just keep going?!"

"She's prioritizing attack over everything else right now."

"So you mean before any situational judgment about what will happen if she steps on the caltrops, she's just moving forward right over them in order to take advantage of the opening the enemy provided when she pulled a pointlessly showy move like an aerial somersault? Meaning even if this hobbles her, she won't regret it?"

"That somersault is most likely…inviting her."

Lady Proud was about to take a step forward, heedless of the caltrops, but before she could take that step, she slipped on something stick shaped. Without even the time to be surprised, Lady Proud gave the stick-shaped thing a light kick and moved forward, striking Metallie with a front kick the moment before she could land.

Metallie tried to create a shield, but Lady Proud's kick came too fast, and she didn't make it. There was the sound of bone breaking and impact on flesh through her guard. She spun to the side as she dove into the thicket, and Lady Proud ran after her.

"D-direct hit! What a sound that made! That's gotta hurt! Really hurt!"

"Something just happened."

"Umm, rewind the video, rewind… I'm sorry. Doing anything complex with the cameras, aside from just switching between them, is a little difficult from our end. It'll break if you mess around with it, so. Ah! Fav, sorry for the trouble, but can we ask you to handle this?"

After much complaining, Fav rewound the video for them. He also put it on slo-mo to replay, and they checked the stick-shaped object that had been thrown at Lady Proud's feet.

"…Is that an umbrella?"
"It's an umbrella."

When they canceled the rewind and slo-mo and returned to the live feed, there was a magical girl… After Metallie and Lady Proud had vanished, she had showed up. A magical girl wearing a yellow raincoat picked up a stick-shaped something from the grass, saying, "Oh, there it is"—the object was, in fact, a closed umbrella. The girl in the raincoat muttered, "I've got to have her win a bit more," then ran after Lady Proud.

"That magical girl is…Umbrain, huh? She's currently in possession of twenty-one flags," said Pammy.

"She's from the Department of Diplomacy."

"Oh? So she's another colleague of yours, Pam?"

"She's one of Lady Proud's subordinates… Just what is she doing?"

"According to what it says here, Umbrain's magical umbrella ignores the mass and speed of objects and is able to block them gently."

"She must have kept Lady Proud from stepping on the caltrops by throwing that umbrella at her and blocking her foot. So then is she supporting Lady Proud?" Pam wondered.

"Fav, pardon me, but please rewind to where Umbrain was."

They switched around through various cameras. Umbrain was inspecting a fallen magical girl. She pulled a folded flag from the girl's pocket, then tucked it away in her raincoat.

That fallen magical girl looked familiar. She was the lasso-wielding girl Lady Proud had just defeated. Archfiend Pam considered. Lady Proud had been carrying only one flag. And then there was what Umbrain had just said.

"Is this sort of thing allowed?" Pammy asked.

"…It's not forbidden by the rules," Pam said.

"It's not at all a bad thing to do, in the sense of a subordinate offering backup to her superior. But why doesn't Lady Proud go to retrieve the flags herself? Doing it like this, no matter how much she wins, she'll wind up ranking low…"

Archfiend Pam recalled that Lady Proud had been making quite a lot of noise as she went through the forest. Had that been her playing decoy, in order to attract enemies? It was a division of labor, with Lady Proud being the vanguard/decoy and Umbrain acting as retrieval/support.

Ultimately, such a division of labor would place Lady Proud in danger, and on top of that, Umbrain was the one getting the flags in the end. Lady Proud wouldn't benefit at all. But putting herself on the line for her subordinate's sake without any consideration for loss or benefit was very like her. Archfiend Pam smiled.

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I drew in a long breath, then exhaled long. My heart calmed. There were fewer people. It was only the hyenas left, or the strong. Hyenas were fine. Strong ones were even better. I just wanted them to go on a big rampage. Cause trouble for Archfiend Pam. Take the wings from around her.

I remembered how I'd seen Archfiend Pam before, from a distance, before this exercise began.

For my preliminary investigation, I'd spent a few days looking into Archfiend Pam's affairs. It wasn't like I'd never thought I could do it then and there, if I had the chance, but when I actually saw her myself, I dropped that idea. She had a different air to her. It was impossible. The wings. The wings were the problem. I'd seen videos of the way Archfiend Pam fought. If only the wings were gone, then I'd have no problem. So an ambush, then. No matter how strong a magical girl is, if you attack her unawares, you can get her easily. I've finished off many just like that.

My opponent was a magical girl who had showy fights on a public stage. I'm a magical girl who sneaks around in the background. Even if the both of us wore black costumes, that's a difference of heaven and earth. Archfiend Pam was respected, while I was held in contempt. I was fine with that. That was exactly what had given me this opportunity. The stars that shine in the sky pay no attention to the bugs skittering and scuttling around on the ground. To her, I may as well not have existed.

There wasn't much time left. I calmed myself, telling myself not to rush. If I had an opportunity, I'd make my move. If there wasn't, I would not. That was all it was. There was no need to be hasty.

The calls of bugs. The calls of birds. The sound of a snake slithering along the ground. The voices of people talking. The sounds of moans. A first-aid tent for the injured? It wasn't anything strange for it to be near the headquarters tent.

It didn't matter what sort of magical girl was nearby. I would make sure to finish Archfiend Pam off by force before anyone else could interfere.

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"We have the totals," said Pammy. "Currently number one is Lake of Fire Flame Flamey. She's currently located in…"

"Area D-51."

"Whoa there. You're fast, Pam."

"I have a wing on standby in the area, so I know where it is."

"That reminds me—didn't she cause a forest fire? So she's a problem child, huh?"

"I wouldn't say that… It's more that she gets easily heated up, or easily influenced."

"I see, so she's on fire for this exercise as well, huh?"

With her crimson hair in disarray, the magical girl clad in a fire-colored dress flew along, weaving between the trees. She was not jumping. Her feet never touched the ground as she flew.

"Flamey's power is fire," Pam explained. "She makes it possible to fly by combusting the air and forcing its expansion to make it jet out."

"She didn't originally have the ability to fly?"

"It's entirely an application of her magic power."

"That's amazing…but isn't that dangerous when flying at such low altitude?"

"Carelessly flying too high would make her a target for competitors with ranged attacks."

The cameras switched from one to another. Flamey flew far faster than a strong-legged magical girl could run through the forest. And Flamey was a master at flying at low altitude while weaving in between obstacles. By flying so low, Flamey was endangering not herself, but her surroundings. Since she blasted out so many sparks to propel herself, the risk of starting a fire always followed her. Currently, one of Archfiend Pam's wings was trailing her.

"Ohhh, she's looking quite heated up, huh?"
"Flamey is the head of the Archfiend Cram School Six Volcanoes."
"The Archfiend Cram School Six Volcanoes! That sounds pretty amazing."
"She also holds positions in the Archfiend Cram School Twelve Demon Generals, Archfiend Cram School Three Heavenly Princesses, Archfiend Cram School Pentagram, Archfiend Cram School Four Absolute Fists, and the Archfiend Cram School Seven Lucky Gods. It means she's capable enough to receive such invitations from many groups."

The corners of her lips were pulled up all the way. Not only that, but occasionally sounds slipped out. They sounded high in pitch, somewhere between a *yeek* and a *squeak*. Lake of Fire Flame Flamey was laughing.

"It feels like she's really into this…"
"She's the type to get easily swept away."
"Whoa there, and now Flamey's taken a turn! Has she found some prey?!"

The corners of Flamey's lips drew up at an even sharper angle. The camera switched to a different one. Another magical girl appeared on-screen, and there wasn't even time to blink before Flamey leaped for her. The girl rolled forward to evade, and when Flamey came back to her in an instant U-turn, the girl created a giant soap bubble between herself and Flamey—but it was pointless against Flamey's charge. The soap bubble popped without slowing her one bit, and, unable to evade Flamey's charge, the magical girl in the overalls rolled over the ground.

"It says here she's Uttakatta. A freelance magical girl. In the interview, she just said straight-out that she was after the prize money," said Pammy.

"So she uses bubbles?" said Pam.

"It seems like bubbles have pretty bad compatibility with fire."

"That depends on her magic."

"It says Uttakatta's magic bubbles are elastic and can't be easily destroyed, even by magical girls…but it doesn't say they're heat resistant. From what I can see, the instant that bubble touched the flame, it burst. If she can't use her bubbles, that will make this a pretty tough fight for her."

The fire spread through the foliage, the flames illuminating their surroundings in bright red. A particularly large flame burst upward, then took human shape. The human shape melted into the fire and disappeared, then appeared in a different flame, then did the same again. Each time, tongues of fire licked at the flora, spreading the fire outward.

"Flame Flamey moves inside fire," said Pam.

"So you mean that a fire scene is the optimal battlefield for her? That's trouble for the rest of us, huh?"

"We're fully prepared to extinguish any fire."

The magical girl in overalls with horns growing on her head, Uttakatta, put her straw in her mouth and blew a breath. With a single puff, she blew out a bunch of bubbles that were individually about a tenth the size of the massive one earlier. Perhaps seeking to avoid fighting in the fire, she used those bubbles as footing to flee higher into the sky.

Flamey fully materialized from inside the flame, spiraling upward into the sky. Uttakatta created one step after another, aiming upward, but she swayed unsteadily. The bubbles under her feet were swaying. It made her react too slowly.

Flamey had reached her. Uttakatta was too off balance to guard. Her expression twisted, and she jumped off her bubble, arching her posture to backflip and just barely avoid Flamey, but there was no footing underneath her. She fell to the ground.

“Flamey created an updraft,” Pam explained. “She used it to destabilize those bubble steps.”

“It looked as if she was flying like that just to show off, but there was a proper purpose to it, huh?”

Before she could crash into the ground, Uttakatta blew a giant bubble. The big bubble enveloped her body, floating lightly, but Flamey was already looming right in front of her. Inside the bubble, Uttakatta couldn’t avoid her. The corners of Flamey’s lips lifted at an even sharper angle, and Uttakatta narrowed one eye and smiled sardonically, sticking one hand into her overalls.

Right before Flamey charged, the bubble went cloudy white, shielding Uttakatta, inside, from view. A heartbeat later, a scream went up. The two magical girls fell down onto a rocky zone away from the area that was on fire—one of them did a turn in midair and landed on her feet, while the other fell back-first and hit hard. Without breaking her fall, holding both arms against herself, she rolled over the rocky area before fainting in agony.

The magical girl who had landed on her feet—Uttakatta—slowly rose, smiling with only her lips.

“What just happened?! Flamey, the attacker, was the one to get hit! That looks painful! That looks really painful! What the heck just happened here?!”

“Look at the area where the two clashed. There’s white powder scattered around, isn’t there?”

“White powder… Yes, there is. What is that?”

“Fire-extinguishing agent.”

“Extinguishing agent! Oh yeah, the inside of that bubble went white right before they made contact… Was that Uttakatta sprinkling extinguishing agent inside the bubble?”

“Flame Flamey is, as her name indicates, composed of flame. Regular extinguishing agent is one thing, but magical extinguishing agent is a powerful poison to her.”

“Wow, that’s incredible!”

“It’s extremely difficult to spray Flamey with extinguishing agent when she’s fast in flight. But if you arranged it as a trap and lured her in, then it wouldn’t matter how quickly she’s flying.”

“But magic fire-extinguishing agent…? Bringing in such an item…”

“It’s forbidden to bring in any sort of equipment, excluding things refined from your own costume and magic. Of course, you are not allowed to bring in fire-extinguishing agent.”

“So then was this against the rules?”

“No… If my memory serves me, Uttakatta was one of the participants who helped with the firefighting earlier. I think she most likely pilfered some extinguishing agent then.”

“Is that allowed, rulewise?”

“It’s a very gray area, but it’s not formally against the rules.”

Rolling over the rocky area, groaning, yelling, crying, Flamey expressed her pain in every way imaginable, but nevertheless she picked herself up in less than ten seconds. She was shuddering wildly, teeth clenched, drool running from the corners of her mouth, her breathing ragged. Somehow holding up her spinning head, she looked up at the sky with unsteady eyes to gasp.

Countless cloudy white bubbles filled the area around her.

“Wai—”

She wasn’t able to finish. The rush of bubbles popped one after another, with Flamey in their center, white powder sprinkling upward as a shrill screech ripped through the night, then eventually faded away.

“Lake of Fire Flame Flamey is out! Uttakatta has jumped to the top!”

“No, it doesn’t look like it.”

“Huh? Really?”

“Since the upper-ranked competitors are taking each other out, the scores are fluctuating quite intensely.”

“So at this stage, we really don’t know anymore, huh?”

“For now, I’ll send in one of my wings to help fight the fire.”

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Flamey did good work for me, in the end. Well, though I'm sure she never imagined that what she pulled would lead to her master being in trouble.

I probed the area to see if anyone was around.

Archfiend Pam's wings were now gone. They had all left the tent.

The mascot was grumbling to himself as he was forced to work. Archfiend Pam was doing her commentary, and the annoying announcer was doing her announcing. The mascot and announcer were no problem. At most, I would wish for them to bemoan their poor luck for getting hit along with her.

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Archfiend Pam looked at the clock. It was just about over. There had been a lot to worry about with the exercise this year.

She was aware that this was because she was doing something that she wasn't used to doing. She would have preferred to avoid doing this kind of work if she could, but since it was an order from the Department of Diplomacy, her hands were tied.

She hadn't heard that Marika or Cranberry had been knocked out of the running. They were both attention-getting people, so if either was to lose, it would come up in conversation. If Pam hadn't heard about it, maybe they were still swinging at each other. She envied them a bit.

"And now, finally, the rankings near the top appear to be in a state of chaos," said Pammy.

"Since only those who have gathered many flags are left. You can aim to turn the tables just by defeating one person."

"The totals have been counted, pon."

Perhaps Cranberry's mascot Fav had gotten sick of waiting so long, as he'd been managing the flag count to kill time. It seemed he didn't really care how his own master was doing right now.

"Current first place: Uttakatta," Fav said.

Line after line of letters and numbers came up on her magical phone. Fav periodically beat his wings, making golden powder scatter each time. Eventually, there was a shrill synthetic call of "Pon," as the lines of characters and Fav paused at the same time.

"Ah, first place switched, pon. With a lead of three flags, Styler

Mimi—"

"And here comes Styler Mimi!" Pammy cried.

"It's changed again. With a lead of one flag, Umbrain—"

"And now Umbrain is racing ahead!"

There was no prize money for anyone but number one, and there were no certificates of honor or trophies awarded, either. Not only that, since second place and below wouldn't even be announced, even if you tried to brag about it, it wouldn't be anything but your own word. So the majority would aim for the top by whatever means possible, making the competition for first place intense.

"It's an absolute free-for-all, pon. The high scorers are… Umbrain, Duchess, Twin Stars Cutie Altair, Blue Comet, Uttakatta, Sanae Utatane, Maiya, Barter Ranko, Moru-Moru Morgue, Styler Mimi, and Puchi-Devy. That's everyone who seems like they could make first place in the end, pon."

"Who will win first place?! The countdown to the end has already begun!"

Archfiend Pam touched a fingertip between her eyes. Her brow was knotted.

The Archfiend Cram School crowd wasn't doing as well as expected. The only one in a position to aim for first place was Cutie Altair, and the names of the other students and graduates weren't even coming up.

Even if it had been inevitable that the top two most talented candidates—Cranberry and Marika—had clashed at the beginning, everyone else was a problem. Amy and Monako had finished up early and then gone to fool around in the first-aid tent. Right as Archfiend Pam had been yelling at them, saying that if they had so much spare time, they should go help out the first-aid team, they'd disappeared. Pam had not received word that Amy and Monako had joined up with the first-aid team. And it wasn't much different with the other students and graduates, either.

Archfiend Pam wondered. Maybe it was her own fault. Telling them not to be reckless with outside participants was tantamount to saying to go easy on them. So then it wouldn't be odd for them to have interpreted that as, *"You don't have to get serious. You can slack off."*

So long as the strongest won, Pam was fine with it. She *was* fine with it, but with the end now in fact nigh, she did find herself wishing just a few more Archfiend Cram School people were in the running.

Even if she didn't show her bias, she couldn't lie to her heart.

Archfiend Pam took her left hand, pressed it between her eyes, and placed it on the side of her head. She felt feverish.

The Archfiend Cram School crowd, Pam included, had underestimated the outside participants. Don't be reckless with the guests? Just who did she think she was? These were not people to be underestimated. Even Pam, who'd been the one to interview the candidates, had failed to notice. This was the result of her misplaced concern that she had to weed them out and make sure they had only those with a minimum level of combat ability.

I'm the one who should be reflecting on her own behavior the most.

Archfiend Pam sank deeper into her chair and looked up at the ceiling of the tent. Her spine crackled, and Pam shot up from her chair, readying herself, facing the desk. Fav hadn't noticed. The announcer was facing the monitor.

There was a magical girl here. Her face was covered with a thick gas mask. She wasn't one of the participants. She wasn't someone Archfiend Pam knew. She'd slid out from underneath the mountain of magical phones. Her costume was all black, and the hair flowing to her back was also black. On her back were two insectoid wings with a black luster, and two long feelers grew from her head. She was a cockroach.

Archfiend Pam understood at a glance that she was an enemy. Pam took a step forward and kicked. She pulverized the desk, sending the magical phones scattering all over in a shower of wood fragments and metal fittings. But the magical girl had already vanished. Archfiend Pam's excellent eye for movement had caught her motion. The black, cockroach-like magical girl had dived under the magical phones once again, faster than Pam could touch her with her fist. The table was destroyed and the phones scattered everywhere, but the magical girl was not there.

The announcer kicked her chair back and stood. Fav was yelling something.

Archfiend Pam turned around while simultaneously kicking out. The magical girl in black slipped into the crack between the tent and the ground to evade her attack. Was her magic to be able to enter any crack?

Next, she appeared on the other side of the tent. She was a ways away from Archfiend Pam.

The magical girl in black had a metal lump in her right hand. A cable extended from it, and there was a row of some kind of switches on it. It seemed to be some kind of device, but with Archfiend Pam's meager knowledge of technology, she had no idea what the thing was for. The one thing she did understand was that it was dangerous. Her spine made that sound when something dangerous approached her in a peaceful moment.

If it was a bomb, and it was set off this close, the magical girl in black would certainly be caught in the blast as well. She didn't have the fanatical bearing of someone who would choose a suicide attack. The air around her was tense and dry. She felt like a professional. If that gas mask was not a decoration, then she was probably going to spray gas. Would it knock Pam out, or paralyze her, or would it be instant death?

The right arm of the girl in black swung down, and she was about to slam the device on the ground. Pam could easily imagine what sort of thing would happen when the device hit.

Even if she blocked it, that would still cause an impact to the device. It wouldn't necessarily keep the device from activating.

From this distance, if she attacked the magical girl, she wouldn't make it in time. And even if she did land a hit, the device would still hit the ground.

If she tried to kick the device away, whatever happened on impact would probably be the same as if it hit the ground. She didn't have the time, the composure, or the knowledge to disassemble and disable it. She also couldn't run away alone. There were first-aid tents all around.

In other words, no matter what Archfiend Pam did, the device would get hit. And that was just what the magical girl in black had been aiming for. She'd been guiding Archfiend Pam's movements, placing herself far enough away that Pam wouldn't make it, in order to accomplish her ultimate goal.

The moment the device was about to fall, someone else moved.

The announcer slid in and caught the device, simultaneously transforming and changing color to become a black, cloth-shaped object, wrapping up the device and the magical girl who had thrown it, then instantly becoming a spherical shape. A sound boomed from deep inside it, followed by a shock that made the black sphere tremble fiercely.

"…What happened, pon?"

"Just a bit of an accident, don't worry. More importantly, the totals, please," Pam said to Fav.

Bringing out the wings from her back, Pam examined her surroundings warily. She didn't particularly get the sense that anything would happen. The magical girl seemed to have been a solo culprit. She hadn't disappeared from within the sphere, either. Archfiend Pam's guess that she couldn't run away if there was no crack for her to slide into must have been correct.

When Pam had been asked to do announcing or commentary for the recording, she'd easily decided on commentary. But all the magical girls who were capable of keeping up with a rapidly changing battle situation to announce along with Archfiend Pam's commentary had applied to participate in the exercise, so there wasn't anyone left who could be the announcer. And Pam wouldn't get in the way of someone who wanted to fight. So, left with no choice, she'd figured she would handle both announcing and commentary herself, and so had transformed one wing into the shape of a magical girl and controlled her, performing both roles by herself. This made it so the announcer was able to keep up with Pam's swift commentary, too.

Pam had really been laughing at herself for it, thinking it was a very silly thing to do, but it had turned out to be a good idea.

Her attacker must have assumed she was nothing but a commentator. Archfiend Pam stayed on guard as she heard the ending buzzer, and before long, there was a loud and excited crowd outside the tent.

"Results in, pon. With a one-flag lead, Twin Stars Cutie Altair."

For just a moment, Archfiend Pam thought, *I somehow managed to maintain my reputation*, and then she was ashamed of herself for it.

Operation Get Rid of Patricia

This story takes place shortly before the events of *Magical Girl Raising Project ACES*.

Debut

Bonus with purchase of *Magical Girl Raising Project ACES* at Comic Toranoana

Operation Get Rid of Patricia

One week had passed since Pfle had assigned Patricia to be Mamori's bodyguard. Wherever Mamori went, Patricia went with her. Turn around, and she'd be right there. If Mamori went to the bathroom, she'd wait in front of her stall.

She didn't even get a break during class.

"Nice to meet you. I'm Cia Hattori."

Money and power made the impossible possible. A woman who was clearly in her early twenties wearing a uniform and transferring to a high school was an abnormal situation. But since the Hitokoujis had okayed it, the school had no grounds to refuse, and the students weren't allowed to talk about it on social media, either.

From the day she'd transferred in, rumors had spread that Patricia was Mamori Totoyama's new lover. Of course, *new lover* implied that there was an old lover. Who could that possibly be?

If someone asked Mamori, "Who's that person who's always with you?" she could only ever answer with Patricia's alias: "She's Hattori." As for Patricia herself, she was surprisingly quick to adapt, and she even raised her hand in class to answer questions or clenched her fists and sang enthusiastically during music lessons, and she was an active participant in gym class. She displayed a level of athleticism far beyond that of a teenager, leading the gym teacher to beg her to please join the track club. Was that even okay, though? Patricia also quickly became friendly with her classmates, making all the prissy girls laugh with her quips.

Kanoe, the one who'd hired Patricia as bodyguard, holed herself up at home to do her own investigation and pondering. Mamori would have liked to do something about her, too, but even if she wanted to, Patricia was in the way. She wasn't just guarding Mamori—she was monitoring her. Mamori could assume that if she did anything, Patricia would report it straight to Kanoe.

She was going to get rid of Patricia. She'd get separated from her and play it off as a coincidence, then send a message to Snow White so she could do something about Kanoe. *That's a good plan*, Mamori thought. *This could work.*

She tried the orthodox method: getting lost in a crowd to shake her off. But no matter where Mamori went—packed trains, amusement parks, scramble crossings—and no matter how irregularly she moved, even if she went against the flow of people, Patricia stuck right by her side.

Mamori tried hopping onto a random train the moment before the doors closed. But right when she was thinking it had worked, she looked to the side and saw Patricia standing there. She figured she had no choice but to resort to more forceful methods; she even tried breaking into a sudden sprint in a residential district. As she ran for dear life, she came up with an excuse: *Well, I suddenly got the urge to break into a run. You get that sometimes, right?* But when she ran out of steam, panting hard, she turned to find Patricia standing right behind her. She hadn't even broken a sweat. Mamori was in shock. "You've got no endurance, huh, Mamori?" Patricia said with a laugh. Mamori had no response.

Patricia was downright demonic. Since she'd been hired by a demon like Kanoe, it wasn't at all strange for her to also be one. Nothing was off the table if a human wanted to win against a demon.

Mamori switched tactics. Rather than trying to lose her, she should just induce Patricia to leave of her own accord. If Patricia were to relinquish her position and tell Kanoe she didn't want to follow Mamori around anymore, that would be a win for Mamori.

Mamori fished through the Hitokouji pantry, looking for something she remembered being there. She could do just about anything in the estate as long as she said that Kanoe allowed her. In other words, Kanoe could get away with anything on the property, which aggravated Mamori to no end. But now wasn't the time to be taking issue with that.

Mamori discovered what she'd been looking for at the back of the pantry, all covered in dust. It was *surströmming*—a can of fermented herring, reputed to be the stinkiest food in the world.

Patricia had amazing athletic reflexes, but that had no bearing on whether she could tolerate foul odors. This had to work. Mamori moved into action, certain she would succeed. She had Patricia stand beside her as she opened the *surströmming*; the swelled-up can burst from the pressure and spewed its contents all over Mamori, who wound up stuck in bed until the following morning.

Patricia fanned Mamori as she writhed in bed, then murmured in sheer awe, “I think I kind of get why the boss likes you so much, Mamori.”

“Urk… Patricia, you don’t have to fan me…”

“Well, if I don’t, then the smell comes toward me.”

“Damn it…”

Magical Girl Assassination Project

This story takes place shortly after the events of "Snow White Raising Project."

Debut

This is a new story written for this book.

Magical Girl Assassination Project

◇ Snow White

Deep in a dark alley, facing the cement block wall, was a girl in a uniform, hanging her head.

She had one hand in the canvas bag that hung from her shoulder, and she was fishing around inside it. She kept whispering, "I can't find it," and "What am I gonna do?" over and over as she continued searching through the bag. There weren't many people passing by this residential area at night, where the streetlamps barely illuminated anything, and there was no one to help the girl.

Snow White expelled a quiet breath through her nose and walked quietly, as if tiptoeing over wet paper. With silent steps, she approached the girl from behind. When she was practically close enough to touch the girl, she reached her hand into her own bag hanging from her waist and pulled out her weapon, Ruler, before thrusting the butt end into the girl's pale neck. The girl yelped as her knees buckled, and she dropped her bag.

The contents of her bag spilled out. A pen, a handkerchief, a coin purse, notepad, phone, some kind of key—and then a blackish metal lump rolled over the asphalt with a thud and a clunk. It had a humorous, very cartoonish design, but it was a handgun.

The girl staggered but still leaped for the gun. Snow White moved reflexively, but the girl was slightly closer.

Snow White could hear the voice of the girl's heart saying, *I can't let her take it.*

The girl's hand touched the gun.

Her heart spoke again: *I can't let her have it, no matter what.*

Snow White flung out her leg in desperation. She kicked the girl's hand and the gun both, knocking the weapon away. Through her boot, she felt the sensation of the bones in the back of the girl's hand breaking, and she heard her smothered scream. This was a magical girl she was dealing with. Swallowing her disgust, Snow White swung her weapon up. She smacked the handle down on top of the head before her. This time, the girl passed out, collapsing on the road. Snow White couldn't hear the voice of her heart, either.

Now unconscious, the girl was unable to maintain her transformation, and her magical-girl body returned to human. The glossy black hair that went down her back became a short brown bob. Her clothing didn't change—she was still in a school uniform. She must have put on a uniform from the neighborhood middle school after switching to her magical-girl form.

Snow White was about to lift the girl up, but after bending halfway over, she stopped. She suddenly wondered if it might be a bad idea to just touch her like this. Maybe she should be a little more cautious. The girl might be an amateur, but Snow White figured she should be careful, just in case she struck back, however unlikely that was.

Snow White gently flipped the girl over with a *hup*. Her facial features and figure placed her in her midtwenties, and the school uniform looked more like a costume.

After tightly tying up the girl—no, the woman—Snow White tossed her into her bag. She also tossed the woman's bag and its contents inside her own, and finally, she picked up the gun that she'd kicked to the edge of the gutter.

It was round, like a balloon filled with air, and black like it had been painted all over with India ink, with a decorative snake wrapped around it. It was in the style of a revolver, with magic bullets loaded in it.

The bullets would turn whatever they hit to stone. They would make anything living or inanimate hard as rock and turn it into a stone statue, and of course it would also die. It was simple and easy to understand—and lethal.

The gun she held in her hand was shaking slightly. Snow White took a deep breath into her gut and grunted as she tensed up. Her hand stopped shaking, as did the gun.

She'd managed to learn how the gun worked because her opponent had unconsciously imagined it being stolen and used on her. If, rather than just passively listening to the voice of someone's heart, Snow White initiated an action to listen in on them, she could acquire even more information. But even simply initiating that action made her feel breathless, and hearing their voices—

never mind being breathless, she'd feel ready to stop breathing entirely. Back with Frederica, and this time as well, the voices she'd heard had all, without exception, been frightening. She felt like her spirit would break.

The one who had carried this gun had been earning money by killing. She'd figured that Snow White was a good magical girl, and that if she pretended to be someone in trouble, she'd catch Snow White somewhere, and so had been dangling her fishing line. If she failed to catch Snow White, she'd planned to gradually make more of a scene to draw attention to herself. And if that happened, she had no hesitation or guilt about dragging the townspeople into it, too.

And this wasn't the only magical girl who thought of human lives as mere pawns. Before catching this gunslinger, Snow White had defeated another magical girl, an assassin who'd tried to take out Snow White after a large bounty had been placed on her head. She had called Ripple, who was out of the prefecture doing work related to the Magical Kingdom, and who had given her strict orders: "I'm coming back right away, so just hide—don't even think about trying to fight."

Was that the right choice? Despite her training from Ripple, Snow White was overwhelmingly lacking in real combat experience—in fact, she doubted she even had enough training. It had gone well with Frederica, but she wouldn't necessarily succeed this time. It was reckless for someone with only superficial knowledge to fight professionals.

But if the town would be dragged into it, then she couldn't run away. Ripple had been worried about her safety, but Snow White absolutely didn't want anyone to get hurt, die, or be murdered—least of all by a magical girl. Taking another deep breath, she firmed up her back and knees.

Snow White lifted her gaze to the cloudy sky. She could hear the voices of people's hearts.

She leaped from a cement block wall up to the roof of a covered walkway, then raced from roof to roof, heading for the Jounan district. It was a red-light district in N City that was particularly lively at night. Around this time of day, the voices of the heart here were louder than in any other part of the city.

Snow White could hear not only voices of the heart but actual voices, too. There were dazzlingly bright lights, crowds of people, and the smell of people and food mixed with alcohol. The Jounan district had once been under the control of Calamity Mary, who hadn't allowed other magical girls to enter, but now it was under Snow White's jurisdiction.

After racing up the side of a building to the roof, from there she leaped to another roof, jumping down from a sex business with glaring neon lights to land on one knee in a back alley. She lifted her head and turned her gaze to the street.

She stood up and, as she caught her breath, headed for the exit of the alleyway. With the dust hanging around her lit by the faint glow that peeked between the buildings, she walked straight ahead, then paused. The voices of the hearts in this area were moving strangely. Snow White clenched her fists, struck her knees, calmed her breathing, and steeled herself to step out under the lights of the main road. The bystanders immediately stared at Snow White.

Here they come.

Passing under the arm of a playboy-looking guy in a brightly colored shirt as he reached out for her, she sidestepped to evade the commuter bag that came swinging from a man in a double-breasted suit who looked like an office worker in his fifties—then right ahead a group of expressionless suits surged toward her from either side, and Snow White jumped with only the power of her calves to cross over their heads and stand on top of a guardrail. All of their physical capabilities were typical for humans, and simply evading them wasn't difficult.

Snow White inclined her ears to the voices. Everyone in the area was being controlled. The voices of their hearts were dull and monotonous. They were only after Snow White, coming for her with no regard for their own safety. Only one person was worrying about their own safety. That heart alone was saying various things—to not let the target get away, to keep its own location from being discovered, to make the control of its magic precise.

Snow White somersaulted to avoid the fist thrust at her from behind, and while in midair, she checked all around. When she saw everyone in sight breaking into a run toward her, she sprinted into a lane to the side of a credit union—and an instant later, a vehicle went over the guardrail and crashed into the building. The zombielike crowd climbed over the vehicle, swarming toward her. In the middle of the lane, Snow White stopped in her tracks. Running away wouldn't get her anywhere. She raced toward the pack of people coming for her and leaped in, slipping past limbs and bodies. There were a lot of them, and avoiding hurting any of them held her back, but this was easy compared with sparring with Ripple. Before, fear of the numbers might have brought Snow White to her knees. But she wasn't the same person now that she'd been before. She didn't slow down, sliding under a stalled vehicle to slip past it.

While running and jumping, she'd been listening closely to locate that voice that was worried about itself. Since the other voices were all in motion, it was actually easy to tell. It was the one that *wasn't* moving, staying in place.

Coming up from under the car, Snow White sped up, becoming one with the weapon she held in her right hand as she charged, crossing the lanes to the monument on the sidewalk on the other side—something the mayor had apparently asked a famous sculptor to make for the city—to pierce the statue through with Ruler's handle, slamming the butt into the stomach of the magical girl hiding behind it.

With stone fragments scattering, she left her weapon stuck in the statue and swiftly circled to the other side. As the girl there was falling, an expression of shock on her face, next Snow White kneed her in the gut to knock her out before kicking the antenna atop her head, breaking it off. Now she couldn't emit her signal to control people, for the time being. Snow White tied her up and tossed her into her bag, along with Ruler.

The voice of the girl's heart, which had been talking about how she would use people as shields to take a safe position, how she would manage to escape if her shields were destroyed—just listening had been unpleasant—could now no longer be heard.

Setting her toes on a window frame, Snow White jumped, leaping from frame to frame to stand on the iron fence of a roof to look down. The brainwashed people who'd essentially been made to act as meat shields forgot that they'd almost been used up and thrown away, or maybe they hadn't noticed, and they were yelling things like "What happened?!" and "What's going on?!" at each other. Some had their phones out and were trying to record the scene, while others looked like they were calling ambulances or police.

Snow White exhaled all the air in her lungs. More were coming. She couldn't stick around.

Jumping off the iron fence, Snow White somersaulted to avoid the pale-green cone-shaped objects that came flying at her from behind, spinning her weapon to repel the attacking cones. The tiny cones were about an inch tall, with a base diameter of less than an inch, and they came at her one after another. Not just ten or twenty. Even just at a glance, there were a hundred, five hundred, or maybe more; the cones were practically all she could see. She dodged left and right to avoid the approaching cones that reminded her of a school of fish.

In a string of strikes and parries, part of the stomach of her costume ended up shredded. She restrained her agitation. She couldn't stop; the cones were keeping up with her. When they hit the iron fence, they ripped it to shreds, and when they engulfed a concrete wall, they dug clean into it. Jumping and leaping, she dodged and evaded.

Maybe this was what skyfish looked like if they were real. The unearthly sight of these cones, which looked a lot like chocolate candies or art objects, swarming through the air was dizzying.

The flock of cones momentarily paused in their pursuit before scattering slightly. They undulated, rotating clockwise high in the air, and each section changed its speed: one part faster, one part at a constant speed, and one part slower, and before you knew it, the flock was separated into five sections. Snow White listened and watched closely, following the movements of one group. Group A was ahead of her, group B was behind, group C was on her right, D was on her left, and E was directly above, each occupying a different position from which to strike her.

As comical as they appeared, these cones were lethal; they could even kill a magical girl. If Snow White made the smallest of mistakes, her life would be forfeit.

The Koyuki Himekawa inside her head was sobbing, *I'm scared, I'm scared.* Snow White scolded her, telling her, *They're slower than Ripple, weaker than Ripple, not as scary as Ripple*, and then she moved. Hopping a half step to the right, she braced her legs, then raced out for the opposite side. The group of cones coming at her from the left side wobbled slightly.

She was managing to move like she had in training. *I can do this*, she thought as she tightened her grip on Ruler's handle.

Taking advantage of the moment's opening when the whole swarm was unsettled, the instant before she made contact with the enemy, she jumped, jumping over the flock to swing her weapon, mowing down the whole rear section of the group with her blade. A shriek like a file scraping along her soul struck her eardrums, and after Snow White landed, she shook her head.

That section of the cone flock landed weakly on the ground, and the surrounding groups gathered in the same way. Filling up the gaps between them, they made the shape of a human figure like a potato that had boiled apart, and it gradually took proper shape to become a fallen girl in a long-sleeved T-shirt packed with English letters, jeans, and pale-brown pigtails—the sort of girl you might see anywhere.

The girl had used her magic to transform her own body into cone-shaped objects, then created a large number of duplicates of identical shape and function and moved them as a mass.

Snow White grabbed the girl by her collar and dragged her up, tied her up, and put her in the bag. Though there had been just one main body in the flock of hundreds of cones, Snow White had heard her voice saying, *I'll be in trouble if my main body is attacked, so I'll place it somewhere that doesn't stand out,* making it completely clear to her which cone she should attack.

"Snow White!"

The next had come.

She turned to face who had called out to her: a girl with horns, a dragon tail, a toned figure, a knight-themed costume, and, most of all, a large sword. Snow White's heart leaped violently in her chest. The girl looked just like Snow White's old partner. Snow White scowled. Weapon in hand, she prepared herself for a fight.

"What's wrong, Snow White?"

Snow White saw this as nothing more than an illusion, a bit of infantile harassment—this magical girl hadn't even transformed into Snow White's old partner; her magic just automatically showed whoever the opponent most didn't want to attack. When she'd heard the voice of her heart, she'd known this would happen. It wasn't actually La Pucelle. She told herself this firmly. But though she should have understood that, her body wasn't listening to her. La Pucelle walked right up to the tip of her blade. Snow White tensed her knees to keep them from shaking.

As the magical girl reached out to her blade, Snow White thrust toward her, and when her opponent backed away right before the thrust connected, Snow White also leaped back. La Pucelle's expression went from surprise to twisting in a nasty smile, and her form gradually melted and changed into a different shape. Snow White did not avert her eyes, watching. It could never have been La Pucelle. She'd known that to begin with.

"No matter how tough someone is, that'll still surprise them for a second." The large sword became a *naginata*. The knight-style costume transformed into the style of a Sengoku warrior. "Impressive that you fought back, not the least bit rattled."

She swung her *naginata*, which was dressed up in floral decorations, and with two sharp swishes of her blade brought the tip to point at Snow White. Snow White did the same, swinging her weapon up and at the ready.

She *had* felt rattled, and hesitant. She just hadn't shown it. The Koyuki Himekawa inside her heart was still crying.

"Heh-heh… Well then, let's fight fair and square," said her opponent.

"Isn't it strange for someone who's been forced to fight because they just failed at a cowardly sneak attack to say 'fair and square'?"

The samurai girl smirked, and the wing-shaped part of her face mask rattled. When she opened her mouth like she was going to say something, Snow White thrust at her, was knocked aside, then attacked with a succession of thrusts to have her attacks returned, the opponent's blade swinging at her with a slamming strength. Shredded iron fence, concrete fragments, and exposed rebar were tossed into the sky one after another, colliding between the two of them.

The flower accessory that decorated Snow White's head was flicked away. The tie at her neck was cut off, and a crack ran near her right elbow and spurted blood. She was listening to the voice of her opponent's heart, ignoring all her feints and narrowing it down to only her actual attacks, but even then, she couldn't handle it all. She gradually backed up, but the enemy matched her steps and came forward, preventing her from getting out of range. Her opponent slammed her weapon, and when Snow White just about dropped Ruler, the samurai girl aimed for her shins with a sweep—hearing the voice of her heart, Snow White desperately evaded, only to be met with a rising slice from low up to her chin, and Snow White flung her body back into an arch, leaping backward to somehow avoid it. Had she not heard the voice of her opponent's heart, she would've died at any moment.

Death was closing in. Her head couldn't handle the voice from her opponent's heart. Nausea welled up in her.

Since they were using similar weapons, Snow White felt keenly and painfully just how much stronger the other girl was. Unlike Snow White, who had borrowed someone else's weapon out of necessity—and even now it was difficult to say she managed to use it well—her opponent had wielded the same weapon ever since she'd first become a magical girl.

From each and every one of her moves—thrust, sweep, riposte—her training and combat experience came across stronger and more clearly than the voice of her heart. Snow White could picture her lifestyle: training every single day with the goal of being stronger than her opponents, turning her back to helping people, thinking it a foolish idea and giving it no notice as she immersed herself neck deep in combat. She was strong, fast, intense, flexible, graceful, and had a wealth of experience and a strong heart.

And she wasn't just strong. She used her magic in order to wrench openings for herself.

The shape of the samurai suddenly twisted and vanished, and now it was a monochromatic Alice in Wonderland standing there. Though she and Snow White were near the same height, she slouched quite a lot, so her eye level was lower. She stared up at Snow White with heavily bagged eyes as, with no windup, she thrust forward with the street sign grasped in her right hand. Snow White backstepped, and her boot heel touched the iron railing. It sent a shudder through the whole fence, making a grating sound. The black-and-white Alice got a slimy smile—one the real one would definitely never have gotten—and swung the street sign vertically. Even though it hadn't even connected, the concrete was split open. Alice transformed back into the armored warrior.

"So it doesn't work after all, huh? That's odd. Normally, it gets to people a little more."

Her opponent was very calm about this fight. After all, Snow White was weaker than she.

"Word has it you can hear the inner voices of people in trouble…but I wonder about that. It doesn't seem limited to those who are in trouble. Am I wrong?"

Snow White was lacking in strength, in experience, and in skills. She'd felt the same thing when she'd fought with Pythie Frederica, too. Ripple had been there that time. Ripple wasn't here now. There was just Snow White. She was scared. This was frightening. She wanted to run away. But she couldn't. The Snow White who would just cry without doing anything was no more. She had gone. Snow White gritted her teeth. No more regrets.

"Whatever—if we fight until I kill you, then I'll find out, whether you like it or not."

"Would you please stop running your mouth?" Snow White asked.

The armored warrior laughed, face guard rattling. "Yeah, fair enough. Pardon my manners."

"Are you like this when you talk with Kenichirou, too?"

The expression covered by the face guard of the helmet stiffened up for a moment. The armored warrior hurriedly dodged the concrete chunks Snow White kicked up. That movement was lacking her earlier calm. Snow White swung her weapon to follow up by flinging three concrete chunks at her, then charged straight ahead with all her strength—or so she made it seem, before she ran in the opposite direction. In other words, she ran away.

The disquieted voice of her opponent's heart was dumbfounded for a moment before it all converged in one direction: anger, toward Snow White. With a short curse, the samurai girl gave chase.

They leaped from building to building. Despite being in heavy armor, the enemy ran faster. Gradually, the voice of her heart drew closer.

Along with the urge to vomit came the understanding of just how effective it was to use someone her opponent cared about as a tool to shake her heart. Just by listening to the voice of her heart and casually bringing up his name, she'd made the enemy lose her presence of mind. She was now a dark coalescence of murderous intent in pursuit of Snow White.

That voice of the heart was close. Now was the time. Jumping off a round water tank, Snow White slid along a rain gutter to drop to a roof, going flat down on the spot like a frog. A heartbeat later, a ray of light streaked past, and Snow White rolled to the right. The armored warrior thrust out with her *naginata*, but Snow White evaded that by a narrow margin as well, and her hair was only slightly singed by the beam of light, with no actual damage done.

A taunt flew at her. Leaping from one building over, coming over two metal fences, was a magical girl holding a shining sphere the size of a human head. When she landed, the semitransparent spheres that decorated her whole costume clinked together and rang. In contrast with the light, bell-like sounds of the balls, her expression was twisted up in an expression of utter irritation. What Snow White could hear of the voice of her heart wasn't much different from what came across from her expression and taunt. It wasn't pleasant to listen to, but it was thanks to clearly hearing the voice of her heart that Snow White had been able to lead her to this place.

Under her left arm, she held a large sphere that was three times larger than the decorations on her costume as she made an exaggerated shrug. The little spheres clinked with the motion, ringing again. The costume underneath the little spheres was purple, and the ribbon on her head was green. She looked like a bunch of grapes. "Just what kind of reflexes do you gotta have, avoiding that?"

The armored samurai retrieved her *naginata*, sending concrete chunks flying toward the grapes magical girl. A succession of light rays fired from the large sphere to meet the chunks midair, turning them into a line of smoke. Grapes girl huffed, and the armored samurai indignantly pointed the tip of her *naginata* at her. "You vicious cur."

"What?" grapes girl shot back.

"Don't interfere. This is my target."

"Oh, bullshit. It's obviously first come, first serve."

"In that case, the one who found her first gets priority."

"Moron! *Obviously*, the one to kill her first takes all, ass-for-brains!"

"This target knows too much, and she opened her big fat mouth."

"Nobody cares about your stupid reasons, you rusty museum piece."

The armored samurai thrust her *naginata* forward, blade pointed upward. The sphere rose, swaying in front of the grapes girl as if it were blocking the way. It made an equilateral triangle with five-yard sides that included Snow White, but both the samurai girl's and the grapes girl's attention had been distracted from her.

Though Snow White tried to smother her fear, there was a limit to that. Pouring further fear over it, telling herself she had to move or she would die without becoming the magical girl she wished to be, she made it fuel to propel herself. Using the voices of their hearts, gazes, the movements of arms and legs, everything as material, she searched for the narrow route that would lead to her victory.

…It's here.

A hair before the heightened tension between the two other magical girls was ready to explode, Snow White leaped backward. Her left hand was on the handle of her weapon, while her right thrust into her bag.

The armored samurai raced for Snow White, and at the same time, the large sphere flew through the air.

As it flew, it changed shape. The sphere swelled and twisted, its tip becoming pointed and sharp. It made a soft-looking heart shape. As it transformed, it gathered light. In midair, the armored samurai turned the other way, twisting her body around. Snow White tugged the pin out of the fire extinguisher she'd pulled from her bag.

"Blazing Ray of Love!" the grapes girl cried. A flash of light followed.

Snow White sprayed white powder over the whole area. She felt the sound of a collision. There was a smothered shriek, followed by a shrill yell. Then a rising smell of something burning.

All sound vanished, as if time had stopped. Snow White silenced her breathing and waited patiently. The powder scattered. Then cleared.

The white powder that had filled her whole field of vision thinned, and two magical girls appeared.

One had fallen on the ground. There was a *yoroi-doshi* sword thrust into her stomach. She was moaning, her hands pressed against the place where she'd been stabbed, trying to stop the bleeding. It was the grapes girl. The object that had been in the shape of a heart returned to its original form as a sphere to weakly roll on the ground. It was now a bland gray color.

The other girl was standing. She was tilted diagonally, on the verge of collapse, but she was still on her feet. Black smoke trailed from spots all over her body, her armor was sooty, and her right shoulder guard in particular was melted. Of course, the flesh underneath would not be unscathed, and even just the parts that were visible seemed pretty badly burned. The voice of her heart was just about screaming.

But still, she clenched her teeth and would not fall. The armored samurai tried to lift her *naginata* to point at Snow White, her eyebrows coming together. She was confused. Of course she was. Snow White was inside the cloud of white extinguishing powder with an invisibility cloak over her shoulders.

And there was one more thing.

From underneath the cloak, Snow White had raised a black, rounded gun. With the gun pointed at the enemy, her fingers were on the snake decoration to support it. She pulled the trigger. At just about the same instant as the gunshot, the armored samurai moved, crouching down to hold her left hand up in front of her face. She blocked all five bullets with the back of her gauntlet and her breastplate.

The shots had been fired by an invisible enemy, and she'd moved, reacting to the sound, but she'd made it in time anyway. That was the sort of enemy she was. She could even take being shot at—and it was precisely because Snow White had understood it wouldn't kill her that her finger had been able to pull the trigger. She tossed away the gun and took Ruler in hand again in one smooth motion.

The armored samurai crushed concrete underfoot as she stepped forward, swinging down with all her strength.

But the armor covering her torso had been petrified, and, failing to keep up with her movements, it shattered. Stone flakes scattered away. Her gauntlets peeled off. Her breastplate broke open. With her center of gravity suddenly changed, she lost her balance but still didn't drop her weapon. She took in a breath, then swung her *naginata*.

Looking up at the *naginata* coming down toward the top of her head, Snow White took half a step back. The force of the air coming from the blade alone made a vertical slice in her invisibility cloak, and blood spurted from her forehead, a few shredded hairs dancing in the sky. If the enemy had stepped even a few inches closer, Snow White's face would have been sliced open. But the armored samurai was too off balance to make it those few inches forward.

Snow White let her opponent swing through her missed face strike, knocking aside her weapon during her evasive movement, slicing at the enemy in her forward stance to hit her shin. She cut through the shin guard, which was exhausted from being heated, and with that one strike reached the bone.

Anticipating a push inward and using it to slice at the opponent's shins was a move that she'd learned from the voice of the enemy's heart. Normally, a technique that she'd just learned without practicing first would not have succeeded. After throwing everything at her—the sphere-using magical girl who'd been lying in wait, the invisibility cloak, the magic gun, her ability to hear the voices of hearts, and her training with Ripple to fight Frederica—only then had she finally bought these few inches and landed a hit.

Turning the blade of her weapon backward when the enemy pitched forward, Snow White struck her once, twice, three times in the back of the head and kept beating her on her helmet. Once Snow White was no longer able to hear the voice of her heart, she finally stopped her battering, drew back her weapon, thrust it onto the roof, and leaned on it. It was a struggle to even stay on her feet. But she couldn't fall yet.

She could hear the voice of a heart. It was racing toward her at intense speed. She turned in the direction of the voice. By the time she saw the magical girl leaping toward her from above the building, she was already right in front of her. She was frighteningly fast.

The magical girl had a pair of steel fans hanging from her waist. Her eyes were so cold, you couldn't sense any warmth in them at all. Even just looking at her, Snow White felt a penetrating chill in her heart, and a shudder rose from her feet. There were absolutely no weaknesses in the way she moved. At a glance, Snow White was certain: If they fought now, there was no way she could win.

The magical girl with the fans approached one step, two, and with the third step, two yards away, she stopped. Whether running or walking, she always maintained a balance with her whole body. The voice of her heart was a calm one, too. "I'm Fan Lit Fan, from the Inspection Department. I take it you're under attack."

Snow White could tell from the voice of her heart that this was the person who had rushed over because a connection of Ripple's had made a report to that place called the Inspection Department. Snow White let out a deep sigh.

Sliding her gaze to the magical girl who was pressing the blade thrust into her stomach and moaning, then to the magical girl who'd had a dent beaten into her helmet, Snow White dropped her eyes to the bag at her waist and patted it. "These two aren't the only ones. There are four others."

She wished this magical girl with the Inspection Department had arrived a little faster, but she kept the thought to herself. This was a thousand or ten thousand times better than the time with Cranberry, when she hadn't even known whom to report to.

She pulled out several more detransformed magical girls: the girl who turned into cones, the girl who could control people, and the girl with the gun, and then, finally, a girl in a tracksuit. This last one—the magical girl with bear ears—had been the start of it all.

She had attacked Snow White as a giant bear. Snow White had somehow fought her off, and then, by hearing the voice of her heart, she had found out that there was a bounty on her head, and so she'd contacted Ripple, outside the prefecture.

"Before arresting them, they have to be treated with first aid, at least, or they'll be in trouble," said Snow White. "Do you have that sort of magic?"

"No, but I do have a magical first-aid kit," Fan replied.

"I'll help."

"Let's treat you first."

"I'll be all right. The one stabbed in the stomach is wounded the worst. Start with her." A little sigh slipped from Snow White's lips. She'd prioritized someone hurt worse than she. She felt as if this was the first magical-girl-like thing she had said that day.

Taking a swing at someone from behind, knowing a car was going to crash right there and doing nothing about it, knowing there were people inside a building as she selected it as her site of battle, attacking the illusions of La Pucelle and Hardgore Alice, using someone an opponent cared about to upset them, cutting the flesh and bone of magical girls with her blade, and engaging in bloody battle were all things she didn't want to do. She didn't think magical girls should be doing things like that. But even so, she had to do them. And she would have to do them in the future, too.

Even before she'd fought with Pythie Frederica, Snow White had gotten the feeling that after fighting, she'd gotten stronger. And she felt like she was stronger after the fight today than she'd been before it, too. Maybe it was her imagination. But if it was perhaps not her imagination, then she would have to fight still.

Hearing a cry of surprise, she looked beside her. Fan Lit Fan's expression hadn't changed, but she couldn't smother her inner voice.

As Snow White restrained the limbs of the moaning magical girl, she tilted her head. "Is there something surprising?"

Though Fan was a little embarrassed by Snow White's sudden remark, she didn't let that show on her face. Maintaining her *"It's nothing big"* pose, she replied quietly, "Well…there's some famous outlaws here, so a bit."

"Famous? Really?"

Eyes running over the fallen magical girls, Fan nodded. "Lycanis, Head Shokko, Merun, Muleina…Lady Kajin, A-Grade Grillette. Anyone from the Inspection Department would think, *That one, huh?* just from hearing any of their names. Some are even members of antiestablishment factions or Archfiend Cram School dropouts. When I heard you were the Magical-Girl Hunter, I was still fairly skeptical about it, but…"

"The Magical-Girl Hunter?"

Fan's brow wrinkled for just an instant before she quickly returned to her original expressionless mask. But no matter how she tried to smooth it over, Snow White could hear the voice of her heart. She could also hear how the term "Magical-Girl Hunter," which had been used by Pythie Frederica, who was under investigation, was being used in the Inspection Department.

If that was how it was, it made some things clearer. When Snow White considered who might be pleased to see a bounty placed on her head, slotting in Pythie Frederica made the most sense. Making her fight and making her stronger. Having her called the Magical-Girl Hunter Snow White, the one who took down magical girls, and making her out as someone to be feared by the wicked.

Snow White had thought before that if there was a culprit, it would turn out to be a Cranberry sympathizer who resented her, but it seemed now that was not the case. Snow White didn't know if Frederica had managed to extend her influence in spite of her capture, or if she'd arranged for it before her arrest, but she figured Frederica had done it.

A-Grade Grillette, the magical girl whose bleeding was being stopped, moaned in pain, but Fan paid that no mind at all as she poured liquid medicine on the wound. Even without hearing the voice of her heart, Snow White could tell that Fan was thinking she should suffer a bit. It seemed like Fan Lit Fan could be trusted somewhat.

Snow White removed her right hand from the girl, and with her left, she used her magical phone. After sending Ripple the brief message I'm safe, the person from the Inspection Department has come, she snapped her phone shut. “Fan.”

“…What is it?”

“The magical girl who was the agent for the request for my assassination… I’m referring to the person who has been managing one of those illegal websites to make money.”

There was an employment assistance website that operated under the pretense of helping magical girls who’d been driven out of work and had even been made with the financial support of aristocrats of the Magical Kingdom. Under the surface, it was also an illegal dark web site for paying members who made magical contracts with the operators. That site had become a social hub for those magical girls who would take on dirty work for money—or so she had heard.

“We have identified her,” Fan replied. “We’ve mustered all the forces of the Inspection Department and are chasing her down.”

“It sounds like you haven’t found her yet.”

“…I’m not at liberty to speak about it with someone outside the department.”

Even if she wasn’t able to say, Snow White still heard the voice of her heart. A troublesome criminal had been continuously outwitting the Magical Kingdom. Rumors said she had some kind of patron who helped her, and there was nobody better when it came to running and hiding. She’d given the Inspection Department grief many times.

“Snow White,” said Fan.

“What is it?” Snow White responded, face still turned down. She was thinking about what she should do next. She didn’t try to hide that her mind was elsewhere.

That must have gotten across to Fan, but her tone never changed as she continued, “Ultimately…”

“Yes.”

“If a magical girl is considered capable, then she will have dangerous missions forced on her, and she’ll trip up somewhere along the line. If you don’t want to trip up, then you shouldn’t make a show of your competence. Being modest and quiet is fundamental to being a professional magical girl.”

Snow White looked up. Fan did not make to look toward her, pushing the gauze down hard over the wound. Snow White continued to look at Fan’s face for a while before quietly lowering her head. “Thank you very much for the warning.”

"I'm not warning you out of kindness, so any thanks are unnecessary. If I tell you to settle down, then if you do something reckless, I can at least say that I told you off."

Snow White didn't respond. She felt as if saying anything more in reply to Fan's kindness would be crude. Not putting it into words made her squeeze the arm she was restraining harder, making A-Grade Grillette moan in pain.

Fan's advice was reasonable, but Snow White would act how she chose regardless. If the Inspection Department of the Magical Kingdom couldn't be relied upon, then she had no choice but to somehow manage on her own. She had nothing but distaste for the nickname Magical-Girl Hunter, but if no one else would hunt, then Snow White had no choice but to be the one. She was not going to let this culprit continue to get away, under the protection of some aristocrat.

After considering this far, Snow White suddenly raised her head. In the distance, she could hear the voice of a heart. It was Ripple. She was worried sick about Snow White. While Snow White felt apologetic, the corners of her lips also relaxed slightly upward.

Magical Boys' Elegy

This story takes place shortly before the events of *Magical Girl Raising Project*.

Debut

This is a new story written for this book.

Magical Boys' Elegy

◇ La Pucelle

La Pucelle respected magical girls as a whole. Those feelings hadn't changed one bit ever since she'd been just another magical-girl fan, Souta Kishibe. Even if a soccer fan became a pro soccer player, his years of admiration for the greats weren't going to change overnight. Similarly, it wasn't becoming of a noble magic knight to be flippant and get carried away with herself just because she now stood on the same stage as those she admired.

Once she'd begun working as a magical girl in N City, La Pucelle had also learned about the less glamorous side of magical girls.

Twice, the robotic magical girl Magicaloid 44 had scammed her out of small change by pawning off useless items on her. Weiss Winterprison, the one with the trademark scarf and coat, very persistently tried to get her to go along with her taste in B movies. The classic witch–style Top Speed was particularly overfriendly and very touchy, which was bad for La Pucelle's heart. And whenever Ruler, the one in a princess costume, occasionally showed up, she did nothing but brag. The girl in pajamas, Nemurin, hung out in the chat room all the time like she was the boss there, and often got pestered by the mascot Fav to work more and engage in more activities.

All of them had a side to them that made La Pucelle tilt her head and wonder if that was okay for a magical girl. But still, seeing their activities on the N City magical girl info aggregate site, La Pucelle couldn't help but be impressed. *Actual magical girls really are something else, huh?* she thought. Resolving all sorts of problems with a selfless spirit was the very ethos of the old-school magical girl. And if you added in those activities that people never saw, then it wouldn't be an overstatement to say that the whole of N

City, which had become quite large after absorbing all the surrounding smaller municipalities, was encompassed.

However, there were *some* magical girls La Pucelle could not respect at all.

When the cowboy-style magical girl had shown up on the aggregate site, she'd arrived with the clear scent of violence. It was on the kinder side when she was just kicking, punching, stomping, and making people grovel—she was also accompanied by men who looked clearly criminal, received cash under the table that appeared to be bribes, fired shots at the sky—there were more than just one or two reports of that sort of blatant criminality.

This anti-magical-girl-like behavior from Calamity Mary, the top outlaw in N City, did not jibe with La Pucelle's aesthetic sense. It wasn't even a matter of respect at this point—she wasn't even forgivable under such superficially noble pretexts as "individual freedom" or "variety among magical girls." She was just a criminal being allowed to run wild.

So La Pucelle had suggested in the chat that they should at least tell her what they thought, but then all the senior magical girls warned her off.

> Forget it, forget it! Ya shouldn't even be sayin' this in the chat, where ya can browse the logs.
>
> That's dangerous~! And scary~! And frightening~!
>
> Fal can't recommend it at all, pon.
>
> ♪
>
> If you simply insist you must do it, then I would be glad if, before the deed, you were to write a will indicating you will leave all your assets to Magicaloid.
>
> kdsflkj, fsorry, my stupid dog was just jumping on me.

Despite her being very calculated about it, picking out a day when there were a lot of people in the chat and anticipating at least one person had to agree when she brought it up, everyone was totally against the idea. The nun-style avatar's head hung, her eyes filled with distress as she silently shook her head. Winterprison's expression was serious as she responded with only, "You should drop the idea." It seemed as if she was telling La Pucelle not to stick her nose in, and it probably wasn't just her imagination.

Glaring at the chat window, La Pucelle clenched her fist.

She'd heard the story of how the kindhearted nun Sister Nana had stepped into Calamity Mary's territory in an attempt to say her piece, and of how she'd only somehow managed to get away with Winterprison protecting her. Sister Nana was La Pucelle's teacher, and Nana's partner Winterprison was also basically her teacher when it came to combat. La Pucelle knew Nana was strong, which was exactly what made that episode when she'd been driven to flee with her tail between her legs so frustrating. La Pucelle felt more than just slightly that if she'd been there, something like that wouldn't have happened. She'd thought Winterprison would surely agree, but Winterprison had opposed her.

Sitting herself down on top of the steel tower, with nobody else around, La Pucelle questioned herself.

There was an extremely dangerous outlaw whom even magical girls could not touch. But could you say that washing your hands of the matter because she was dangerous was right? Was that something a noble-minded magical knight should do?

In the chat, the subject had already changed, and Magicaloid had begun trying to sell junk.

◇◇◇

Three days had passed since that magical-girl chat. It was five in the afternoon. Under the glow of the sunset, La Pucelle jumped from building to building. Fundamentally speaking, magical girls were most active from sundown to late at night, but she figured that in Jounan's red-light district, also known as the rural nightless city, there would actually be more people around later, and so, after racking her brains about it all, she'd chosen the dusk. This had come at the cost of faking illness to get out of club time—behavior bad enough for Souta to lose his right to be a member of the soccer club.

Even if Winterprison had had Sister Nana to protect at the time, for her to choose to leave the scene when Sister Nana fled was no minor matter. Calamity Mary was unquestionably strong. She was feared for more than her nasty behavior.

So then how would La Pucelle fight? Her opponent's aesthetic was cowgirl, so of course she'd mainly use projectile weapons. La

Pucelle would get into close range, and if she couldn't do that, she'd extend her sword to forcibly get in range and knock down Mary's weapon. If she couldn't manage that, then she'd hit the wall or ground to knock off stones, barraging her enemy to keep her from firing her guns.

Through repeated mental simulations, La Pucelle came to the conclusion that if she did it like this, she could succeed. Worst case—though it wouldn't be very cool, she could add in the option of using her extending sword to cut open an escape route. So then it should basically work out, somehow.

Or so she had more or less hypothesized, but the optimal route would be to change Mary's heart, even a little bit. Thinking that he'd prepare something beforehand to convince her, Souta had started writing an essay, but then he'd gotten really into it, and it had kept growing and growing, and by the time he'd cut it off, thinking this much really had to be enough, he'd had about ten pages of squared draft paper. It was a voluminous work full of love for magical girls, pulling up magical girls old and new as examples.

Any player who had become a real magical girl through the cell phone game *Magical Girl Raising Project* would have an unusual love for magical girls. Calamity Mary had to have a beloved magical girl as well, and if La Pucelle went for that, she was sure to win her over.

The number one goal was to earnestly win her over, but La Pucelle also went through repeated mental battle simulations in preparation for possible failure, giving herself firm confidence in the success of the operation. There were no weaknesses in this double-layered plan. Once night fell, this situation—a magical girl gone astray in N City—would be amended.

A sense of exhilaration spread to fill La Pucelle's chest. She had so much energy, it felt ready to spill out—so she put it into her legs instead as she sprung off a roof. She couldn't be getting too giddy, now. The challenge was only just beginning. She just had to speak calmly, without fear, without getting worked up, acting as usual. Standing on the roof of the abandoned building that was her goal, La Pucelle took a deep breath, swinging her sword up to stop flat in front of her eyes, taking one more deep breath before she slid it into the sheath on her back again. It would be okay. She was calm. It was the same as always. She could do this.

She approached the door, and when she turned the knob, it went right around. The door wasn't locked. This was defenseless, surprising for a building Calamity Mary was using as her hideout. But still, no robber would break in from the roof of an abandoned building, right? So maybe this was what villain hideouts were actually like.

When she opened the door, she still called out, "Pardon me," as she went inside. Within, there was a landing that led straight to a downward staircase. If Mary was here, she'd be below. La Pucelle's voice rang out abnormally loud. Though it was still dusk, it was dark in here like the middle of the night, with a dusty smell wafting around. When La Pucelle took a step onto the landing, there was a loud clanking sound underfoot, and she automatically drew back her leg. She mentally counted to thirty, and when she confirmed that there had been no reactions to her voice or to the sound of her feet, she stepped forward more boldly than before.

The sound here really did echo. If Mary was inside the building, she should already have noticed her. La Pucelle laid her right hand on the hilt of her blade as she walked, so she could draw it at any time. Maybe it was because she was tense, but she felt like her breathing had become shallower. She made a conscious effort to take deep breaths. Halfway down the stairs, there were a number of places where it seemed like the concrete had been gouged out. It looked like something sparkly hung there, and, looking closely, she saw it was piano wire. The windows on the doors of the rooms were sealed with boards and nails, too, with not even a crack of light leaking through. There was a mess of abandoned machinery of unknown purpose, and La Pucelle thoughtlessly reached toward one machine but changed her mind before she touched it. She'd announced her presence, but it wasn't as if she'd gained permission to come in. She shouldn't be touching things in someone else's home without their say-so.

Adopting her original stance, she descended the stairs. A dismantled fire alarm, pulled off the wall. A stepladder left standing, an electric light removed, body and all. A dustpan and a broom, and a rag that was still damp. La Pucelle couldn't help but feel that every single item was in an unnatural position. This wasn't quite what she'd expected, from what she'd heard from Sister Nana and Winterprison. It looked clearly like they were in the middle of something, like moving or prep for renovation, but there was nobody here—what did this mean?

La Pucelle went one flight down, two flights down, and it all still felt strange, and Mary never appeared, either. The entrances to all the rooms and windows were sealed with boards and nails. Was Mary around somewhere? Or was she not? Three flights down, four flights, five, she continued her descent. Since she'd been tensed to respond at a moment's notice to a surprise attack this whole way down, she didn't know anymore what floor she was on. And having come here by jumping from roof to roof, then intruding from the roof as well, she hadn't actually checked how many floors the building had. She also didn't know how many she had to go down to reach the bottom.

Maybe they'd already moved? Or was this a trap or something? Though she was completely on edge, she was still uncertain as she stepped into a large room.

There were no more stairs to go down. So in other words, did that mean this was the first floor?

There was a large door ahead, securely sealed with chains and a padlock, windows placed at evenly spaced intervals, plus two hallways extending to the right and left from the room where she currently stood.

La Pucelle examined the big door first. It was sealed with a padlock and chains. There was also no sign that anyone had gone through recently. So did that mean that if Mary was here, she'd be down one of the two hallways? La Pucelle started to head down one, but her feet stopped. You should always be absolutely sure. Before she tried the hallways, she should make sure the door was really locked. She didn't want to be attacked from behind. La Pucelle took the padlock in hand and lifted it up.

A shrill alarm drowned out the sound of the chains clanking. La Pucelle jerked back, looking all around. She yanked her hand away from the padlock in a panic, but the deluge of sound showed no sign of stopping, just about driving her out of her head, and then there came an even louder yell.

"What're you doing?"

Reacting to the voice, La Pucelle was about to turn around, but she was flung away with a crash. Rolling to the floor, she hurriedly pushed herself up to see an unfamiliar magical girl standing with her back toward her. What had happened? The moment she tried to call out, a ray of light shot out. Her field of vision was whited out, then gradually regained its color. The magical girl had raised a shield big enough to cover her body—it was in the shape of a heart, with a cute design—and white smoke wafted from it, along with a scorched smell. A crackling noise came from the surface of the locked door as it sparked.

"What is thi—? Huh?" said La Pucelle.

"It's a trap, a trap. C'mon, we're running!"

La Pucelle was forced to run, dragged along. The fine skin she felt against her hand made her heart flutter. And not just that. Even in this unusual situation, there was her lightly swaying hair, the strength with which she tugged a magical girl like La Pucelle along, and a fruity smell that tickled her nose. She had a ribbon on her head, and a decoration like waterfowl wings on her back. She was also wearing a jacket, which stuck out from the rest of it.

A magical girl…!

This wasn't anyone La Pucelle knew from the chat. She had never seen any witness reports of a magical girl like this on the aggregate site, either. Was she a new one, or had she come from another district?

In the blink of an eye, they rushed through the hallway, then stopped in front of a metallic wall. It was a fire door. It blocked the hallway like a shutter. A panel was installed on the wall, and a cord extended from the buttons there that was connected to a laptop that had just been left there in the hallway. The laptop was shaped like a blazing flame, and it had cabriole legs and a transparent exterior—some weirdly intense personal aesthetic.

The magical girl hit the keyboard, and the computer started to glow dimly. She continued to clatter away on the keys like she was irritated, but it continued to just glow dimly, and nothing changed.

"Agh, geez! That alarm is obnoxious! But there's no time! And the door won't open!"

It seemed like she was trying to open the door, but it wasn't going well.

La Pucelle put her hand on the magical girl's shoulder and pushed both her and the computer to the left. Still listening to her complain, she drew her sword with her right hand. With the alarm still ringing, she swung down as hard as she could. She extended the sword from eight inches, so that it wouldn't hit the ceiling, to a full yard as she swung, crushing the fire door, ceiling, and wall. She'd meant to just cut it in half with that move, but it hadn't worked out that way.

"Nice! Okay, let's go!" said the girl.

When the girl raced out, though, La Pucelle didn't follow this time, instead standing still.

The girl turned back impatiently. "What're you standing around for?"

"I kinda just did that without thinking… I don't really get what's going on."

"We're running! There's something scary coming right behind us! We don't have the time to escape from above!"

The magical girl firmly took her wrist. Skin rubbed against skin. La Pucelle could feel her humidity, her body heat, her pulse, all through her skin. She was still trying to get out what she meant to say next, but La Pucelle's mouth stopped working, and with blood rushing up into her head, she couldn't even think straight about what she wanted to say. She was unable to resist the mysterious magical girl, and the two of them swept up dust as they ran down the hallway until they both body-slammed the window at the end of it. There was no sound of glass breaking or impact, like she'd expected. They broke through nothing, just space. Had the glass been removed? Was this how the other girl had gotten in? Or had she secured this as an escape route beforehand? Whatever it was, this was a sneak thief's MO.

Maybe La Pucelle had wound up being complicit in a burglary. But even if she wanted to question the girl, her hand was still in the girl's grip, and La Pucelle couldn't get a single word out. Landing just like that on the road, La Pucelle kept her hand on the hilt of her sword as she looked around the area.

This place looked like a back lane. It wasn't overflowing with people like a major artery, but there were people stopping to stare at the building. The alarm was gathering a crowd. People who looked like office workers, people who looked like they were out for fun, ones who looked like hosts, and others who looked like students—many groups were milling around, some pointing, some laughing, others looking concerned. Weaving among the people who had been brought to a halt by the sound of the alarm, the two magical girls ran, becoming a gust of wind that raced through before anyone could notice what had happened.

After going from the shadow of one building to another to a back road by way of a monument that was shaped like something unidentifiable, they paused a moment at a plastic bucket that smelled strongly of tonkotsu before coming out into a back alley.

The sound of the alarm grew distant. But it wasn't gone yet.

"This is bad." The magical girl turned back to a nearby building, getting a wrinkle between her eyebrows. Her expression was the one thing about her that looked adult.

Turning her eyes to where the girl was looking, La Pucelle saw men with the kind of clothes and vibe that did not say "honest profession" yelling at each other and gathering together. They looked bloodthirsty. It seemed like it'd be disaster if the two of them were caught.

"She really seems like the type to come shooting while those guys are roughing up the crowd," said the magical girl. "If we ignore them and run away full speed, we'll leave traces. And there's people watching, too. I heard this area was rural, so why's there so many people around? With so many witnesses, she'd catch up to us somewhere, and just letting us go…is obviously not something *that* magical girl would do, huh?"

It didn't seem like she was necessarily talking to La Pucelle. But her voice was too loud and her words too clear for her to be talking to herself, so maybe she was saying this for La Pucelle's benefit.

"Maybe we have to get a bit drastic," the girl said.

The hand clasping her wrist squeezed hard. La Pucelle's heart hammered in her chest.

"Let's undo our transformations."

La Pucelle didn't have the time or composure to argue back. Her brain was all in a fluster, and once she saw that the other girl had undone her transformation, she followed reflexively. And then once she'd followed, she realized what she'd done, but she was too late.

The girl went, "Huh?"

"Ah, uh…um."

When it came to differences brought about by magical-girl transformation, there was such a wealth of variation that you could say only, *"Depends on the show."* With the mobile game *Magical Girl Raising Project*, no matter what your pretransformation form was, after you changed, you would become a beautiful girl. Souta knew that personally.

"You're…"

"No! Um…"

The mysterious magical girl had transformed into a human girl.

Her hair was darker and shorter, and the line of her jaw was sharper, with less softness in her cheeks. Her build as a magical girl had suggested the third year of middle school, and she'd shrunk to about the first year of middle school or late elementary. Of course, her attire had become plain: a T-shirt, parka, and cargo pants with lots of pockets—the sort of clothes you might see anywhere. But—though it wasn't as if Souta could say specifically what about her gave him this feeling—there was something vaguely similar about her overall facial features. She had a balanced face that didn't give you the sense that she had radically changed. She was quite pretty.

With her eyes and mouth open wide in surprise, the girl rudely examined Souta in his school uniform top to bottom, while Souta hemmed and hawed and twisted around awkwardly. It wasn't like he could turn back time now, and he couldn't erase the girl's memory, either, but if possible, he would like it if she didn't stare.

Souta wanted La Pucelle to be a magical girl who was only ever gallant and classic. Being a middle school boy pretransformation was a very eccentric side character sort of thing. And in the first place, he felt like one guy being mixed up in a group of beautiful girls was corrupt, or like, perverted.

He'd gotten swept along, and now something had happened that he couldn't take back.

After looking at him two, three times, the girl nodded, saying, "Guess some are like this, too," and pulled Souta's hand. Even her voice was similar to that of her magical-girl form. "Oh well."

"Um, I wouldn't say it's 'Oh well…,'" Souta said.

"You can tell me more over there."

The girl was trying to head in the opposite direction from where they'd been going—in other words, toward the nearby building. They'd just been desperately running away from there, so why did they have to head back in that direction?

Souta stiffened his legs, resisting. "Isn't it a bad idea to go that way?"

"Times like these, it stands out more if you try to run. We detransformed in order to wait it out, so we should take it easy. Panicking and leaving the scene is actually riskier."

Now that she pointed it out, maybe that was true. The girl pulled Souta along with surprising strength, and, unable to resist, he was taken to a burger chain that had a number of branches in the city. The girl ordered fries and a shake, and Souta got iced coffee—he didn't actually want it, but he put on a cool act like he did—and they sat down at a two-seat table by the window. As people went by probably just as usual with nonchalant expressions, the two of them got a front-row seat to the sight of those scary-looking men yelling at each other as they raced off. Terrified half to death, Souta gave them little flicking glances. Was it his imagination that they looked like they had something they were scared of, too?

With the girl enthusiastically slurping her shake in front of him, Souta was still confused. What was the meaning of this? Who was she? How should he make excuses for himself? Or should he be shameless about it? The more he thought about it, the more heat built in his head. Did his head feeling hot mean he was blushing, too? She'd been holding his wrist, so she definitely would have felt his temperature and heartbeat. If she already knew all about how flustered he was, then maybe there was nothing to be done about that, either.

"Sorry, gotta use the bathroom for a sec." Souta figured that it'd be best to cool his head, for now. There had to be things that he wouldn't think of unless he calmed down.

As soon as he was in the bathroom, he washed his face at the sink, then carefully wiped it with a paper towel so it wouldn't be noticed that he'd done so. He took some deep breaths, but maybe there was nothing he should be doing in here. He decided that he might as well do what you do in the bathroom. He stood in front of the toilet, pulled down his fly, and did his business as he considered what to do.

“I hope we can go home soon.”

When someone spoke to him, he looked to his side. That girl was right there.

He just about fell over backward, but he caught himself. He was thankful that his major personal rule of never moving when he was doing his business still lived within him. The girl brought both hands in front of her before the urinal, and she was humming. She’d just walked right in. She—no, he—was clearly used to this.

“Th-this is…quite a situation, huh?” Souta said.

“Sure is.”

As time passed, the shock like lightning racing around in his body settled down. When he tried thinking about it, this wasn’t a bad thing. You were denounced as a pervert for sneaking into a girls’ school only because the others were girls. If they were both guys, then it was actually nothing worse than two pitiful people sharing woe, and a younger boy was easier to be around and easier to handle than a younger girl. Souta was used to that with the soccer club, after all.

But still…

Souta pretended he’d known this person was a boy all along, but inside, he was completely shocked. He’d totally thought he was a girl. Now that things were like this, he didn’t doubt it, but without material proof, he wouldn’t have been able to believe someone telling him this was a boy. Now that he thought about it, though, that pull on Souta’s hand had been strong, with no reserve in the way he held it—put in a less flattering way, it had been rough. If you’d told Souta those fingers and nails touching his skin had been a guy’s, that would have made sense. He also dressed nothing like a girl with the values of that age bracket, like trying to look nice or fashionable, and he was actually a boy.

But still, Souta really had gotten the wrong idea. It wasn’t just the way he looked, or his face. Seen from behind, he’d walked slightly pigeon-toed, with small steps, and as if he was walking with grace, even though it was an emergency situation. His walk was ladylike and quiet, just as Souta imagined a “girl walk” to be.

After coming out of the bathroom, the two of them sat down at their original table and started talking, the atmosphere more relaxed than before. Just the other person being a boy made Souta less nervous. That they'd stood side by side in the john together put him even more at ease.

"You're not…a magical girl from around here, are you?" said Souta.

"My normal route's a long ways from here," the boy replied.

"I've heard it's kinda rare for boys to become magical girls."

"I think we're *really* rare. This is the first I've ever met another one."

"Two rares meeting each other by chance is even more rare… but wait, what were you doing there?"

"That's what I'd like to ask you, dude. What were *you* doing?"

"You can call me Souta."

"I'm Kaoru."

Souta was about to say that Kaoru sounded like a girl's name, but he bit his tongue. There was absolutely no benefit to angering a fellow magical girl he'd just met.

"You were just thinking that even my name is girly, weren't you?"

Souta choked. Wiping off the coffee he'd spewed on the table, he looked over at Kaoru to see him smiling like he was amused. His smile had a feminine aura.

"No I wasn't," Souta retorted. "Anyway, what'd you come here to do?"

"The higher-ups got an anonymous tip that someone might be breaking the rules… Whoops, better keep that just between us. That and the fact that I'm even here. And I'd appreciate it if you didn't share our secret with any of your friends, too."

"Oh, yeah. I get it, sort of."

Were the "higher-ups" that Kaoru spoke of with the Magical Kingdom? Fav had made vague mentions of some sort of big magical-girl administrative body.

That made sense. If Calamity Mary was doing just as the rumors said, there was no way an organization governing magical girls could stand by and do nothing. Maybe La Pucelle hadn't needed to act on her own.

"Why were you there, Souta?"

"Um, I heard she was doing bad stuff…and I figured I couldn't just stand there and do nothing."

Compared with a professional like Kaoru, who'd been deployed under orders from the "higher-ups," Souta was only able to say something like a small child would, which utterly embarrassed him. To distract himself from his embarrassment and irritation, he chugged a big mouthful of coffee and choked a bit.

In sharp contrast with Souta's mental state, Kaoru laughed like he was entertained. "I like that! Makes you sound like a superhero!"

"…It does? I don't like to admit it, but it feels like I didn't get anywhere."

"That's not true at all. It's cool, really cool. I like that sort of thing. The magical girls I know have all sort of shifted away from the business, so they don't act out of a sense of justice or anything like that."

"Huh."

"I think it's great. So that's where the whole knight look comes from?"

"I sort of get that feeling, yeah."

"I've heard that usually guys who can turn into magical girls are the type whose transformations aren't much off from their original form, but it's amazing you change that much. Horns and a tail, and the length of your hair is totally different, with perfect eye shadow, and you have a big butt and boobs."

Hearing the words "butt" and "boobs" with that girlish innocent smile made Souta choke again. "Well, um…now that you mention it, you come off pretty similar as a magical girl, Kaoru."

"Apparently, that's more common. I mean, that's just what I've heard. Not like I really know. There are hardly any guys in this business in the first place. Today's the first day I met one aside from myself."

"I heard from Fav—um, from a mascot—that we're unusual, but using my body has never felt off to me. I know someone who's a robot-type magical girl—never mind pretransformation gender, doesn't that seem like it'd feel weirder?"

"So there's other amazing ones out there, huh…? Wow, N City's got it good."

"Oh, so robots are unusual, after all? I kinda got the feeling maybe they were."

The two of them thoroughly discussed various topics about magical girls. It was the time of day when the restaurant would gradually get more crowded, but no one appeared to be listening in on their conversation. The two boys just talked—about magical girls they knew or had seen on TV.

Souta had been speaking timidly at first, always checking on their surroundings, but before he knew it, he got sucked into the conversation, leaning forward enthusiastically. “Is your magic your computer, Kaoru? Or your shield? They both looked like magic items to me.”

“Well…both, I guess. My magic lets me use other people’s magic items decently well. Not as well as the owner, but good enough.”

“Aha, so there’s another person who gets to use items that weren’t their own.”

“Huh? You’re not that surprised? I thought it was a pretty rare power.”

“Oh, I just know a magical girl who keeps coming to sell off items she made.”

“…N City’s got it real good.”

And magic wasn’t the only thing they talked about; they discussed the struggles of boys who loved magical girls and the embarrassment of being a magical girl among all girls. Souta complained about how, although he was glad the others didn’t feel they had to be reserved with him, magical girls were far too lacking in restraint, and shouldn’t they keep their cards a little closer to their chests? Kaoru complained about how it was fine to make plots, but he didn’t really like it when they were so secretive that they’d say nothing right up until push came to shove. They shared their memories of the first anime magical girls they’d seen—Miko for Souta and Kiyoko for Kaoru. Souta got really worked up talking about *Cutie Healer*, and by the time they finished discussing how *Cutie Healer Galaxy* should have ended, Kaoru had an awkward look on his face. Souta somehow got the feeling that Kaoru had slid his chair several inches backward. Souta must’ve gotten a little too worked up.

Souta also spoke passionately about La Pucelle’s story background and what her actual activities were like. Kaoru was particularly interested in the magic sword that could grow and shrink, questioning Souta in detail about the conditions for activation and how it was used. Souta proudly explained the details, but when he said maybe it would be a good idea to actually show Kaoru, he turned his eyes to the window to see it had gotten dark.

No sooner had he noticed this than he rose to his feet. A middle schooler in uniform chatting in the Jounan district late at night could easily wind up with local cops escorting him home. And his mother might also be worried about him, not coming home even though his club activities were over. If she called the school, then it'd even be exposed that he'd skipped club.

Timidly turning his eyes out the window, Souta checked the road in both directions. The sketchy-looking men had disappeared earlier. It was just students and salarymen and such walking along outside.

"I guess I should go soon." Kaoru stood along with Souta. "I figure it's gotta be okay by now."

"Oh yeah… Of course."

"I had fun today. Hope we run into each other again." Kaoru offered his hand, and, after pausing a moment, Souta shook it.

"Yeah, that was nice… It's been a long time since I've talked so much about magical girls. Let's meet up again."

Kaoru's handshake was firm, but he was kind of pigeon-toed, and his bearing was timid and restrained.

Now Souta felt even more strongly that it wasn't just Kaoru's appearance that had made Souta mistake him for a girl, but that his gestures were a large part of it, too. Even if he was a boy—no, precisely because he was a boy, perhaps he was trying to reduce the sense of something being off post-transformation by adopting feminine body language.

Deep down, Souta thought very earnestly, *Man, the pros are so different.*

◇ Kaoru Osanai

Twenty minutes after parting ways with Souta, Kaoru sat down around the middle of the stone steps up to a small shrine on the west end of the Jounan district. He was tired enough that a sigh slipped out of him automatically. Talking with Souta had been a lot of fun, and Souta himself was a good guy, but all the stuff Kaoru was carrying had restricted his movement, and it had been really uncomfortable. Kaoru took out the piano wire, chains, and steel wire that had been wrapped inside his shirt, and the steel plate that had been tucked underneath his parka, and from the pockets of his cargo pants, he pulled out a remote control, black powder, sleeping powder, grenades, an incendiary device, a stun gun, and more, lining everything up on the stone steps to confirm that he hadn't overlooked anything before packing all of it into a small bag. There was magic cast on each item, so they were even more incredible.

La Pucelle bursting in had forced Stella Lulu to escape a bit earlier, which had reduced the number of items she'd plundered somewhat, but she'd been able to acquire no few magic weapons. Disarming all the alarms and booby traps one by one as she made her way along had been a real struggle, and even after that, carrying these piles of pillaged goods had kept her from moving freely, and it had been an uncomfortable experience, but it had been worth it. Stella Lulu had heard that in N City, there was a magical girl who used various magical items, but these were more impressive than the rumors said.

Still, Stella had heard that the examiner running the magical-girl exam being held in this city was the Musician of the Forest, Cranberry. She was the strongest of the strong, having come from the Archfiend Cram School and graduating by landing a hit on *the* Archfiend Pam. If Kaoru got carried away and tried to acquire even more items, he was bound to catch the examiner's eye, and it would be unbearable to witness if the resistance was arrested one after another after him.

Resistance efforts against the tyranny and oppression of the Magical Kingdom had to be carried out surreptitiously. Nobody knew what the Magical Kingdom was really up to, so you could never be too careful where it was concerned. He should be satisfied with this much.

He had considered nabbing La Pucelle's sword while he was at it, but talking to Souta had put Kaoru off from acting on that desire. Doing that sort of thing to a good magical girl like him wasn't to Kaoru's taste—though maybe his older sister would do it. If it came down to a full-scale showdown with the Magical Kingdom, then maybe La Pucelle would be an enemy…but he couldn't rule out the possibility that she might be an ally as well.

The next time they met, Kaoru would try having a deeper, more meaningful chat. He shouldered his bag and trudged away from the shrine.

Afterword

Long time no see to the print readers, as well as to those of you who started reading because of the anime—in fact, there are still a lot of people who started with the anime. I'm so very thankful—and you longtime readers must have been very worried. I'm quite sorry. Now that my thanks and apologies are out of the way, I have this collection of rare short stories to share with you all. And since that alone may not be enough to satisfy readers, here's a little bit about what Maiya, whose name came up in the Hell Survival Games, was up to.

Our dear Maiya had an encounter with the wandering monster Marika Fukuroi, who had strayed from Cranberry. Marika turned out to be really strong even though she had only one flag and hardly any advantage, so Maiya fled—but then she got caught up in the fight between Moru-Moru Morgue and Duchess. As the powerful foes clashed, Maiya held out and toyed with them but unfortunately wound up getting knocked out. However, Duchess and Morgue spent so much time involved in the intense battle with Maiya that they fell short of the points needed to proceed in the games. Maiya actually contributed to Altair's victory, although she doesn't know this herself. And that sums up Maiya's activities following a midgame announcement.

To everyone from the editing department who has guided me, and to S-mura, who passionately argued that I shouldn't put Twin Dragons Panas in this book: You were very right. Thank you so much.

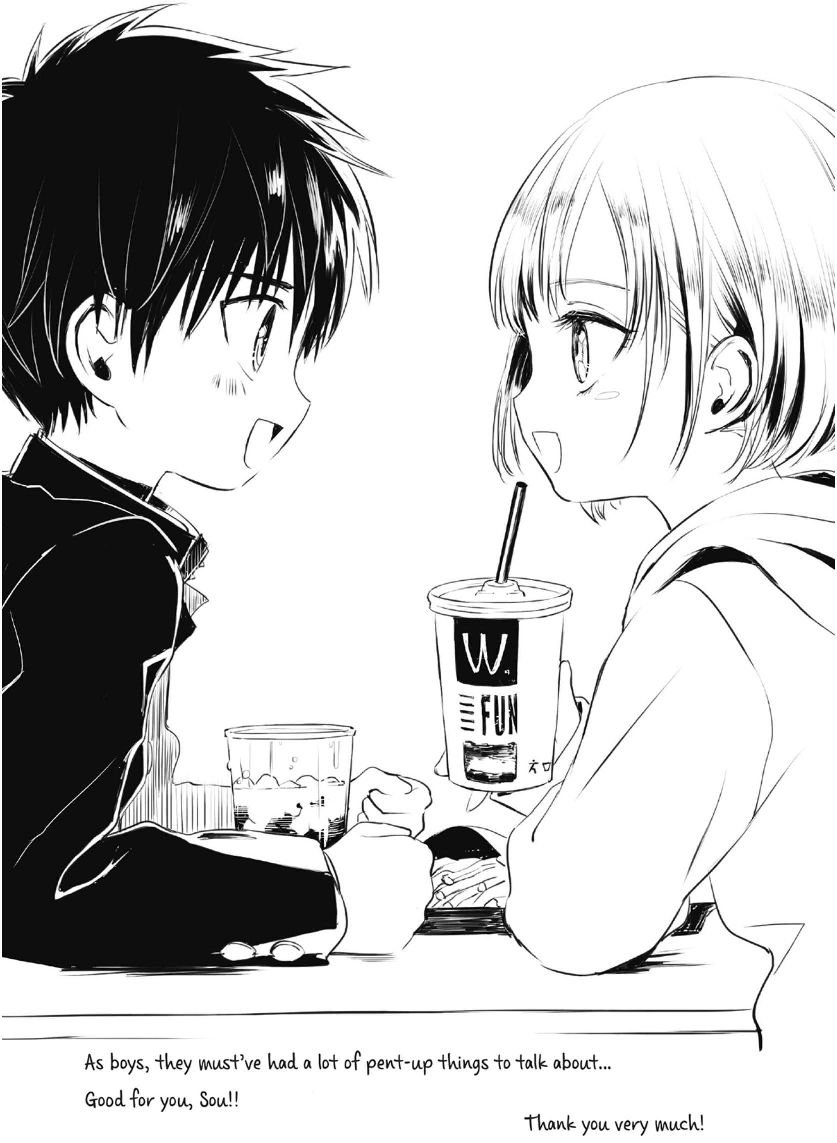
Marui-no, thank you for your wonderful illustrations. I never thought I'd get to see an illustration of La Pucelle and Snow White together so soon in the Reiwa era. Anything feels possible now.

Nao Higashiyama, thank you for your wonderful comments. Your rendition of Snow White's line, "What's a magical girl?" was absolutely perfect. I'm going to keep on writing about these magical girls' everyday lives and battles.

And to all my readers, thank you very much, as always. Not only for buying this book, but for your gifts, reactions, illustrations, fan letters, and Valentine's chocolates, which I am gratefully partaking in. They're far more energy dense than regular food; I have a feeling this might be the reason so many writers seem energy inefficient.

There are a lot of short stories that I was unable to include here, the majority of which are currently available to read online. To those of you who have yet to check those out, please look forward with me to *Magical Girl Raising Project: Breakdown*, which is reaching its climax in serialization right now. The ads at the back of this book will have the details.

I am currently hard at work writing the next story. Hope to see you then!



As boys, they must've had a lot of pent-up things to talk about...

Good for you, Sou!!

Thank you very much!

Marui-no

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